



♪ 杉井 光

さよならピアノソナタ

イラスト♪ 植田 亮

encore pieces

あれから月日がゆき過ぎて、
Since then, time passed by.

ぼくらはみんな、少しだけおとなになった。
All of us have matured a little.

Despite the fact that we are all flying in different directions in order to stretch

our wings fully,
それでも、同じ空のどこかを飛んでいる。
we are still soaring beneath the same sky.

耳を澄ませば聞こえる。お互いの歌声で、それがわかる。

That's easily understood after listening carefully to each of our singing voices



さよならピアノソナタ
encore pieces



♪杉井 光 イラスト♪植田 亮

さよならピエノソナタ

encore pieces

♩ "sonate pour deux"—11

蛸沢

Mafuyu
Ebisawa

真冬

桧川

Naomi
Hikawa

直巳



相原

Chiaki
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千晶



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- Chapter: Stereophonic Love
- Chapter: The Final Interview
- Chapter: Nobody Sleeps Tonight

sonate pour deux

When I set my eyes on the first page of the score, the song reminds me of a fluttering moth.

The countermelody circles around the burning main melody before diving into the flames. Despite being burnt into nothingness, new moths will spawn from the charred ashes — that's the feeling the song has to me.

Sonata in A \flat major, numbered as "opus postumus", which means it's a posthumous work. And since there's no given title for this sonata, I habitually refer to it as <Fire-thieving Moths>.

Ever since I became a ruffian in the classical music industry, I've been asked a few questions several times, one of which is: "Why don't classical pieces have titles? Wouldn't that make it hard to refer to them?" I touched on this topic briefly during an interview for a magazine — it's an interview on an album, although I had only produced one of the songs there.

"Mr. Nao, are you the one who came up with the album's name <Mutant Butterfly>?"

"Yeah, I did. Back then, no one could come up with a name for the album, so the manager said, 'Hey Nao, name one of your favourite songs!'. To which I replied, 'Beethoven's Sonata no.31 in A \flat major'. But they misheard it as <Mutant Butterfly> instead....." [TL Note: Apparently, "A \flat major" sounds similar to "mutant butterfly" in Japanese]

The interviewer roared with laughter. He then posed that question—

"Still, why are classical pieces named as whatever number and whatever pitch, instead of titles that are easier to understand?"

I've been asked that several times already, so I already had an answer prepared.

"Well..... Here's an analogy. The military buffs usually call fighter jets by their model numbers, don't they? They'll call an 'F-14' as such instead of a 'Tomcat', and they'll rarely refer to the 'SR-71' as 'Blackbird'. It's the same for fans of classical music as well. Calling it by its opus number makes us sound cooler and more knowledgeable, doesn't it?"

"I see!"

Of course, that's just me bullshitting.

I first came into contact with <Fire-thieving Moths> on my twenty-fourth birthday.

And the day before that — the last day when I was twenty-three — happened to be the same day when Mafuyu finished her American tour and returned to Japan. With my work just completed, I drove down to Narita Airport early in the morning.

I'm not sure if it was due to the spring holidays, but the airport was filled with tourists when I arrived at ten, and many of them were travelling as a family. The airport was somewhat packed as a result. I spotted Mafuyu's shiny maroon hair immediately as she made her way through the arrival gate. Mafuyu saw me before I could even wave my hands and ran towards me immediately.

The last time we met was during the New Year. Three months had passed, and it felt like she had become even prettier.

Ebisawa Mafuyu — she's now the world famous pianist with 'mercury fingers'. So who came up with that weird title of hers? Sorry to say this, but it was my dad, Hikawa Tetsurou. And since that title suits Mafuyu's way of playing the piano, her 'ice-beauty' look and her rejecting-stance with the media, it was soon accepted by everyone. The title had even made its way overseas.

Even though we're already in our adult years, to me, Mafuyu's still an ordinary girl who cries easily and gets angry over the slightest reasons. And she would only prove my point as she walked towards me with wobbly steps. It has been three months — I think it should be okay to give her a really tight hug, right? But that tiny thought of mine was immediately overtaken by my rationality when I thought about how we would look to the crowd.

"Welcome back—"

Just as I finished saying that, Mafuyu stopped two meters before me. For some reason she was warily scanning the arrival hall behind me.

"A-Anything wrong?" Did she read my mind and realize my desire to hug her?

"We won't be chased around by anyone, right? And we won't be brought to a strange place again, right?"

"Nah! Why would that happen?"

"Those are my only impressions of Narita Airport....."

I then remembered what happened as Mafuyu mumbled those words with her head lowered.

Mafuyu was always flying all over the place for her tours, but this was only the third time I met her at the airport. The first was during the summer when we were in our first year of high school, while the second was in winter; and in both cases, we were chased about by the security. There was hardly any chance to talk. Ah, those were painful days.....

As for the third time — today — Mafuyu had actually requested me to pick her up at the airport. This was the first time she's done this, and it also means Ebichiri won't be around. This was the reason I spent the whole night clearing my work so that I could reach the airport early in the morning.

"Urm..... those were impulsive things we did when we were still young....." I laughed wryly, "But you don't have to worry today. I'm here specially to pick you up!"

Mafuyu nodded her head hard and came right up to me.

"..... I'm back."

Mafuyu's tiny voice was almost drowned by the sounds of rolling luggage. What's wrong? She doesn't look too happy.

But she doesn't seem angry either, so I guess she's just drained out from travelling? She did fly halfway across the globe, and then there's the jet-lag to consider as well. She should be sleeping at this time.

"Where are we going?"

I grabbed Mafuyu's luggage and took my first steps.

"I drove here, so how about sending you home? You should be dead tired, aren't you? You don't look too good."

"Sending me home?"

Mafuyu shot past me and turned around. Looks like I've really pissed her off this time.

"I specially planned my return at a time like this, so why should I go back home?"

"S-Sorry, is there any place you'd like to go?"

Mafuyu shook her head hard.

"Urm..... then? What's going on here?"

"It just means anywhere is fine so long as I can be together with Naomi!"

I must have an incredibly silly expression right now. Mafuyu's face was all red, her eyebrows arching upwards.

"I-I see..... Mmm, I get it. I'm sorry."

I cautiously closed the distance between us and took her hand gently. She returned it with a firm grip.

The announcements were blaring non-stop. As we stepped onto the escalator, I popped the question softly,

"Then..... how about my home?"

Mafuyu nodded. Looking at her from the side, it seemed like she couldn't wait.

We were overwhelmed by fatigue when we reached my home, so after a quick shower we dropped dead onto my bed .

We took another shower after waking up. It was already ten at night when I began preparing our dinner. As for Mafuyu, she walked out of the bathroom with a tired expression, her wet hair wrapped up with a towel. Though our jobs are not really what you'd call normal ones, but it's still a little too much for us to sleep from morning till late into the night. Guess we should reflect on that a little.

While I was preparing the fish in the kitchen, Mafuyu sat herself on my bed and looked around the room. For some strange reason, there was a disappointed expression on her face.

"..... Sorry, my room's really cramped....."

Mafuyu has already visited my room several times, but I still said it deliberately anyway. However, she shook her head instead.

"That's not what I mean. Naomi's room is way too clean. There's nothing I can help out

with."

"Really? I though it's a little messy in several areas."

One of the walls in the room was hung up with rows of guitar and basses, followed by a two-tier electric piano and synthesizer — they almost took up the entire space. I had recently converted my music into digital format, so there aren't many CDs left. As of now, I could not convert the books into digital format, so my shelves were filled to the brim with them.

"Naomi, why are you so neat and tidy even though you're his child?"

Mafuyu knows very well about how destructively lazy Tetsurou is. Still, there was this complicated feeling within me when I heard that question of hers. Can you not word it that way?

"Well, a child grows up by looking at the back of his parents. Though there are occasions when the parent serves as a negative example instead."

"At the very least, allow me to help out with our laundry!" Mafuyu stood up.

"But I already washed them while you were in the shower."

"Why did you wash them?" And why are you so angry?

Mafuyu puffed her cheeks and sat herself onto the bed again.

Mafuyu was still a little unhappy when we were having our dinner. She would eat her food silently, only to peek at my face occasionally.

"Urm..... sorry, are the dishes bad?"

"I've ate plenty of food from various hotels and restaurants in America, but Naomi's miso soup is still the best out there."

Then you should be happier when eating my food.....

"I wish I can eat your food everyday....."

"Nah, that's impossible. I can't possibly freight them to America everyday!"

"From next month onward, I'll be shifting the focus of my work back to Japan. It's tiring to

do tours all the time."

That was surprising. I nearly dropped my bowl onto the floor.

"Eh? Back to Japan..... So that means..... you'll be living here?"

"..... Is that no good?"

"What are you talking about!? Of course it's great! I'm really happy!" I leaned my body forward in excitement. Up till now, the longest Mafuyu had stayed in Japan was a month, and even then we couldn't see each other daily.

"..... And so..... therefore..... I can eat your food..... everyday."

Said Mafuyu as she looked at me shyly.

"But still..... it's not easy for you to do so everyday, isn't it? Your house is of a considerable distance away from mine too....."

I was given a kick in the leg beneath the table. Huh? W-What's going on? She really wants me to send my food to her house everyday?

"Whatever! You're an idiot. Pretend I never said that."

With that, Mafuyu sent a spoonful of sashimi salad into her mouth.

After we were done with dinner, Mafuyu said she wanted to do the dishes. I stopped her immediately.

"Why not?" pouted Mafuyu. "Are you going to say things like how a pianist shouldn't be risking her fingers in chores like this as well?"

"But of course!"

"I hate this. You've done all the housework impeccably, so there's nothing left for me to do!"

"But I don't mind even if you're not doing any of the housework."

"I do!" Don't slam the table! What on earth do you want?

Mafuyu hugged her knees on my bed and turned herself facing the wall — seemed like

she was really pissed off. Therefore, while washing the plates, I asked her cautiously,

"Right, I..... I've bought a new electric piano. Wanna give it a go?"

Mafuyu was still throwing a tantrum by wrapping herself up with a blanket, but she finally got off my bed and sat down before the piano. The switch was flicked on. As Mafuyu rested her 'mercury fingers' on the keyboard, I unconsciously placed the dish down and turned off the tap.

One of Mafuyu's unrivaled characteristics is the delicate way she strikes the keyboard, and it was referred to as 'the faintest sound, like the fogs of the night'. It's a shame though, since the electric piano is unable to interpret those plays from her and replicate the sounds accordingly. Still, what should have been a sickeningly sweet E-major melody was turned into what felt like a cup of smoothie; something that was incredibly comforting to listen to.

It's Edward Elgar's <[Salut d'Amour](#)>, a heart-warming piano piece which he had dedicated to Caroline Alice, the woman who would later become his wife. As the song is less than three minutes long, I stopped the work at hand and listened to it till it was done.

"..... That's the first time I heard you play that song! Do you like Elgar?"

"Nope," Mafuyu shook her head while facing the keyboard. "I dislike everything other than his Cello Concerto."

Now that's being really clear about what she likes and dislikes! But why play that song then?

"It's fine even if you don't understand..... Is there any song that you'll like to listen to?"

"Eh? Well....."

I wasn't sure if she's still angry. I washed the dishes hastily with unease before returning to Mafuyu's side.

"There's lots of stuff that I'd love to listen to you play..... can I really choose? But it's so late already....."

"I'll be staying here tonight."

"Huh?" The lingering sounds of <Salut d'Amour> were totally erased by that strange cry of mine. "Ah, urm..... well..... urm, what I meant was..... I definitely welcome your stay,

but is that really okay? Your dad, he should be back in Japan, no? And since you'll be staying in Japan for the long-term anyway, there's no hurry for you to do so today....."

"Papa's still in America..... though he should already be on his flight at Dallas."

"What's..... going on?"

"It's just..... If I returned to Japan together with Papa, I won't be able to spend time leisurely together with you. So I sneaked away and returned a day earlier."

..... And I hoped I could see you while you're still the same age as I am — upon hearing that explanation from Mafuyu, I sat down on the small piano chair next to her and leaned myself tightly against her. The reason I had my back facing her was because it was really quite embarrassing. I see, so that's the reason why she came back with only a small piece of luggage on her.

"It seems like Papa has something to discuss with you once he's back in Japan. But since it's rare for me to be able to meet you on your birthday, I really don't want to see you together with Papa."

"Ebichiri has something for me?"

What could that be? Probably something related to Mafuyu, I guess? Whenever Ebichiri's looking for me, his image as a 'world renowned conductor,' etc. disappears and is replaced by that of a silly father who dotes on his daughter too much. Given the option, I'd very much hope that he's looking for me to talk about stuff like speakers or stage performances and so on.

Unknowingly, the hands of the clock on the wall have overlapped one another with their directions pointing upwards. The fourth of April has finally arrived.

"Happy birthday, Naomi!"

"Mmm, thanks."

"I've specially prepared a birthday present for you. I bought these in Manchester when the BBC Philharmonic invited me to England."

The patchwork bag she gave me was filled with EP's records and cassette tapes. They were said to be live recordings of the Manchester-born performers before they became famous worldwide. There's the Oasis, The Stone Roses and etc. I never expected her to find stuff like these.

"You don't quite like Manchester music, do you?"

"Mmm..... you do know me well."

The so-called Manchester music are bands labelled under the Britpop genre. For reasons unknown to myself, Britpop music isn't quite my cup of tea.

"You may start to like them after listening to these recordings. Or perhaps you may dislike them even more."

"What about you?"

As I turned my head around, Mafuyu was a hair's breadth away from me. She pouted as she thought of an answer.

"I can't really say if I like it or not, but..... it does make me want to share it with you, Naomi."

"..... I love presents like that."

And that's the truth. The reason music exists was so that they can mesmerize the hearts of others and bring them to an unknown place; as for whether the place will be an oasis or a wasteland filled with thorns and rubble — we'll just have to confirm that when we reach the destination.

"That's not all..... from me. I'll play whatever songs you want."

Feels just like the Christmas of a certain year — Mafuyu and I were reminded of the same thing at the same time. Our faces came into contact with each other as we smiled.

"But since it's so late already....." I took a peek at the clock. It'll be boring if I can only listen to gentle melodies that were on the same lines of <Salut d'Amour>. I do hope she can go all out and play.

I hooked the electric piano to the mixer and plugged in two pairs of earphones. The wires and the warm electric signals linked Mafuyu and I together.

"So what will your first request be?"

Murmured Mafuyu.

"I haven't thought of anything yet. There's still time anyway....."

I made my way to the bed which is of a slight distance away from the piano and went deep in thought.

"Are you okay with a slightly longer piece?"

"If you want me to play Wagner's <[Der Ring des Nibelungen](#)> rearranged for the piano in its entirety, I'll do just that."

Don't! Do you have any idea how long that'll take?

"Because that means I'll get to be together with Naomi!"

I was secretly glad of the fact that Mafuyu was still facing the piano when she said that. I'm so incredibly happy right now, the expression on my face must be a pretty disgusting one.

"Urm..... Well..... How about Beethoven's <[Op. 106](#)> then?"

Her maroon hair bobbed for a brief moment. She raised her slender fingers and placed them onto the keyboard. The first movement, reminiscent of majestic fanfare, began to play through the earphones.



Beethoven's <Piano Sonata No. 29 in B♭ major>—

During Beethoven's time, improvements to the piano were made at a rapid pace. The range of the sounds became wider, while the timbres approached those of the piano in its final pristine form. Whenever the artisans made a new piano, Beethoven would come up with sonatas that would push the pianos to their limits. When it came to Sonata No. 29, he had finally composed a piece which exceeded the instrument's capabilities as well as the musical skills of his time.

In an unexpected twist to even Beethoven himself, the piece which was written for future pianists as well as for a piano of the future was named <Hammerklavier>, the German's name for the fortepiano.

I quite like that term as well, because it does explicitly state that the instrument was made up of hammers and a keyboard. [TL Note: Hammerklavier literally means "hammer-keyboard"]

However, this piece is demanding not only of the instrument itself; it also demands the pianist to reveal everything about himself. The pianist will have to remain focused in the full entirety of the fifty-minute performance, something that is incredibly hard to achieve even for seasoned pianists.

But Mafuyu's playing the <Hammerklavier> right before my eyes — playing a song which she couldn't have done without her fully-recovered fingers.

I closed my eyes and listened to the adagio of the third movement coming from the earphones. It felt as though I was peering into the depths of a spring.

Time spent together with Mafuyu..... there'll be plenty more of times like this.

I received the call the following day. I was trying to rub away the sleepiness on my eyelids with my thumb as I picked up the vibrating cellphone next to my pillow. Whose number is this?

"Hello? This is Ebisawa speaking."

Came a slightly unhappy voice of a man from the other side of a phone. As I was still in a daze, I almost answered with "Which Ebisawa am I speaking to?".

"— Hmm? Ah! You're..... Mr. Ebisawa Chisato?"

I'm not sure if she was awakened by my yell, but Mafuyu, who was sleeping next to me, gave a "Hmm?" and flipped her body around, the tip of her nose pressing tightly into my arm.

"Yes. It has been a while."

"Oh, no, it's okay," I climbed out of the blanket and reflexively sat myself in seiza on the bed.

"I have just returned to Japan and am currently in Tokyo. Mafuyu should have arrived a day earlier than me, but I could not reach her through her phone..... Mmm, so I am wondering if you know where she is. Just in case. Sorry for interrupting you at a time like this, but I just want to make sure."

There were faint hints of a thorny "I have an idea of what's going on, but I don't want to face it anyway" emotion hidden in his words, so I was at a loss of what to say. But Mafuyu just happened to open her eyes slightly right then. Hugging me tightly while still half-asleep, she cooed with a slightly nasal voice, "Naomi? What's going on? What time is it now?" It seemed like Mafuyu's voice was carried over to the other side of the phone as well, because I could hear a painful moan from Ebichiri, which sounded very much like the dying breathes of a cow as it was being strangled. I had an urge to throw my cellphone down the toilet and flush it away.

"Well..... urm..... Mafuyu..... Mafuyu-san's..... at my house right now. Yes, since yesterday....."

Even though he dotes on his daughter to a point where it's beyond salvation, he's also a man who knows his boundaries — I guess that's the biggest misfortune for Ebichiri. All that could be heard was the hot air constantly flowing out the phone, as if he were saying "I know you and Mafuyu are already adults who are fully capable of supporting yourselves and as her parent I'm not in a position where I should talk too much but that and my emotions are two separate matters altogether if you're standing right before me I would have definitely sent you flying with a punch!". The silence was unbearable.

"Today is a holiday, but it's still atrocious for working adults to sleep all the way till noon!"

In the end, he decided to compromise by lecturing us on our living habits instead. But how does he know I had just woken up? Is it because of the laziness in my voice?

"I do not care if you want to emulate the slack life of Hikawa, but do not drag Mafuyu down with you as well."

"Right..... I'm sorry."

Just then, my phone was snatched away from me.

"Papa? Is this Papa? Stop poking your nose into the lives of others! What has this got to do with you!? Didn't I say I'll be taking a break till the following Monday..... W-What's wrong with that!? That's between Naomi and me!"

So what's the father-daughter pair talking about.....? I shrunk myself back into the blanket and listened to them quarreling for a while. The cold sensation of the phone came into contact with my ears once more just as I was about to fall asleep.

"Papa says he wants to meet you."

"Huh? Eh? Why?"

Not so that he can punch me, right? Ebichiri's voice came through the phone once more just as I was in a state of panic.

"Back to business, I actually have a favour to ask of you. Do you mind making a trip today? The issue is slightly complicated, so I would like to speak to you in person if that is okay with you."

Ebichiri designated a music university in Ikebukuro as the meeting place. Mafuyu apologetically said that she didn't want to see her father, so she went home instead. Personally, I was sort of saved by her decision as a tripartite talk was the last thing I wanted — moreover, I don't think the talk has anything to do with Mafuyu.

Still, Mafuyu will be busy with her schedule due to things like practices, interviews, recordings and performances after she leaves, so we ended up dallying around my home to delay our reluctant separation. It was already four in the afternoon when I reached the university. I was late.

"Sorry for being late!"

As I sprinted into the staff room, I was greeted by a kind-looking man in his sixties and Ebichiri, whose hair was greying out rapidly these days. It seemed like they were having an engaging discussion beside a desk filled with files and scores. They took a look at me and then at the clock, and it was only then when they realized that some time had passed

since the agreed time.

"I'm fine with this, but you will have to apologize to our professor here. He has kindly offered his place for us to talk, but you have made him wait."

"I am terribly sorry," I apologized by lowering my head in the direction of the mister, who was wearing a wool vest over a white shirt.

"It's okay, it's okay. First time we meet. My family name is Katase. You're the son of Hikawa, aren't you? Oh my, you sure take after your father."

"Urm, i-is that so?" I've heard that plenty of times since I followed Tetsurou's footsteps into the industry, but this was the only time the comment made me uneasy.

"He's Professor Katase, who teaches history of French music. You can consider him as..... hmm, as my senior."

"Urm..... so he's Kokonoe Hirofume's....."

"Yes, that's right. Ebisawa and I had both learned music theory from Professor Kokonoe!" explained Professor Katase.

Kokonoe Hirofume was a renowned Japanese composer and conductor. He became active in the music scene after World War Two, and participated in the production of many film scores. He was even well received internationally. It is said that he was a really energetic person, conducting on stage a day before his death. A lot of his focus was spent on developing the next generation of musicians as well. Plenty of his students went on to become well-known musicians in Japan, of which the most successful has to be Ebichiri (as for the biggest failure..... I'm afraid that'll be Tetsurou).

"The favour which I talked about through the phone is related to Professor Kokonoe."

Said Ebichiri as he motioned me to have a seat.

"Well..... do you want me to write a critique?" Honestly speaking, I am not too familiar with Kokonoe Hirofume.

"No, not that. I hope you can investigate on something."

Ebichiri then spread a stack of handwritten scores before me. On the aged, yellow paper were notes arranged neatly on the staves. It was titled simply with the words 'Sonate pour deux'. Since it's a score with the treble staff and bass staff, it's likely written for the

piano or some other keyboard instrument. The mood marking was noted as 'tendrement'. French is a language I have zero knowledge of, but I still understand a few commonly used music terminologies — it means "lovingly". There were no tempo markings I could see.

A note with the words 'opus postumus' (posthumous work) was pasted on the first page. It looked pretty new, so it's probably pasted by the person who collated the scores.

"..... Is this a composition by Kokonoe Hirofume?"

"Is it that obvious?" asked Ebichiri.

"No, I'm not at the stage where I can deduce a person's personality just with the score alone....." I'm barely in the budding stages when it comes to that. "I just thought it might be his work after listening to both of you."

"I think it's Kokonoe Hirofume's work as well, but I have no concrete proof," said Professor Katase.

"So we hope you can investigate on the origin of this music and confirm if it is really Professor Kokonoe's work."

Ebichiri explained just as I was getting more and more confused.

Apparently, Professor Katase is currently lending his assistance in a huge documentary series. As he was compiling the large amount of titles composed by Kokonoe Hirofume, he discovered these scores while sorting through his items that were left in the university. It was named as a posthumous work because they discovered it after his death, but they were not sure when it was composed.

"But this should be nothing more than a draft, isn't it? The notes might be flexible enough, but the fugue is made up of only two voices throughout. Moreover, the bass seems pretty empty as well."

"It's reasonable for you to suspect this as an incomplete work, but Professor Kokonoe is a man who is very rigorous with his words. It's hard to imagine this work as an incomplete one."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means he's very strict about his compositions!"

Professor Katase elaborated on what Ebichiri had said,

"Back in the days when he was working on the movie soundtracks, he was extremely furious when the production company named his composition as <Symphony of the Seaside>!"

Come to think of it, I did hear about how Kokonoe Hirofume was an eccentric man who gets into a tantrum really easily and even clashes with the movie producers for no apparent reason. I've also heard things like how he was born into a noble lineage with a long history, only to fall out with his family when he wedded a French woman. They barely got in touch with one another after that.

"Therefore..... there's no way he will title it as a sonata if it is just a draft. Moreover, Professor Kokonoe would definitely destroy his drafts whenever he completes his works, probably because he did not want anyone to see them in their 'incomplete' states....."

"I see. Hmm, but....." I shifted my attention back to the score. "Has any one of you played this piece yet?"

Ebichiri and Professor Katase nodded in response.

"We did, but we cannot call it as anything other than an incomplete work....."

"But that's contradicting what you've said earlier.....?"

"And so with this title, we're guessing....." said Professor Katase as he pointed towards the words 'Sonate pour deux', "What if this sonata is a duet? Perhaps there is another set of scores somewhere."

It's roughly translated as '*Sonata for two*' in English, isn't it? It didn't explicitly state the instrument the song was written for, but from the way the score was written, it should have been composed with a keyboard instrument in mind. Is the sonata written for two pianos? Unable to shake off the questions in my mind, I absent-mindedly ran my fingers past the surface of the score filled with notes.

"This place here..... it looks really empty for the left hand."

"I started off with the same thought as well....." Ebichiri stretched out his hand and flipped the score to a few pages back, "But there are lots of phrases later on where you need two hands to play, so what you've said is not exactly right."

I see. The continuous high-pitched trills of the arpeggio — phrases like that do require the

use of both hands to perform.

"Moreover..... here, take a look at this word."

Professor Katase pointed at the bottom right hand corner of the last page — the word 'ensemble' was written on it.

Ensemble. The term is used specially to refer to a small-scale musical ensemble. Meaning to say, this piece was indeed written for more than one musical instrument. Then again, the instruments were not specified on the score, so there's no way we will know for sure.

The mystery lives on. Moreover, why was the word 'ensemble' written on the final page?

"This is definitely Professor Kokonoe's handwriting, but I'm not sure if this is his composition. It might have been a copy of someone else's work....."

As he said that, Professor Katase removed his spectacles and wiped it.

"Urm....."

I scratched my head. Everything's a mystery.

"May I ask..... why you two chose to approach me? I am totally helpless when it comes to research related to Kokonoe Hirofume....."

"Professor Kokonoe's son is working in that circle of yours, isn't he? The properties of Professor Kokonoe are all under his care. However, he is a well known hater of classical music, so it is difficult for us to contact him."

"Ah, I see."

They're right. Music producer Tooru Charlois is the son of Kokonoe Hirofume. I've seen him several times at the record company as well.

"Urm, but he's a real big-shot! There's no way a small fry like me could come into contact with him....."

"I originally wanted to seek Hikawa's assistance, but I couldn't contact him at all. If I remember right, he is acquainted with Tooru."

Speaking of what Tetsurou's doing right now, I've not the slightest clue as well. I couldn't even get him through his phone. He only sent me a simple message saying "I'll be doing

an interview at Poland for a few days" and poof, no more news from him. Nobody knows where on earth he is right now.

"Sadly, there's not much time left. Ebisawa said Hikawa's son is a pretty dependable person, so I thought I'll try asking you first."

Professor Katase leaned his body forward.

"So what do you think? Can you please help us investigate this matter? I will definitely compensate you for your trouble, of course. I really want to know if this piece is composed by Professor Kokonoe, and if there's another part to the score as well."

Pressured by the air coming from the two men before me, the I could only shift my gaze away from the score.

"..... Well..... why the persistence towards this piece of music? I doubt you are going to do a full compilation of his works, so it should be okay even if the compilation is slightly incomplete."

"Everyone knows most of Professor Kokonoe's works are compositions for the orchestra. Should this actually be his work as well, then it will be the only piano sonata ever composed by him. Moreover....."

With a serious expression on his eyes, Ebichiri murmured,

"This score was kept in the baton case of Professor Kokonoe, something which he carries with him all the time. It must be a really special song."

Ebichiri offered to drive me back home, but I solemnly rejected his offer instead.

"I'll be paying a visit to the publisher, so I won't impose on you."

That was the excuse on paper, but the truth was — it would have been incredibly awkward speaking to Ebichiri in the confined space of a car. I managed to avoid that tragedy, but I was still given a harsh dressing down while on the way to the carpark.

"Be honest with me. What is your job right now? I did hear a few words from Mafuyu, but I still can't put my fingers on it....."

"Ah..... Well....." To be honest, I'm not too sure myself. "I do everything..... And I really

mean everything."

I'm not even sure where to start for the various things I do. It's at the point where I am seriously considering if I should write 'ruffian of the music industry' under the occupation box in the tax report. I write articles frequently for the magazines, and I have also written a book with someone else. Since it's rare of a critic to actually perform himself, I am viewed as someone relatively important in the pop music scene due to my uncommon views. Not only was I invited to write for quite a few songs (though none of them sold well), I was recently featured in the production of one for the very first time as well. It's also common for me to be invited as the harmony for the singers during the recordings.

"So I guess I'm a jack of all trades..... sort of?"

"Hmm..... I am grateful that you're accepting our unreasonable request, but with a work like that..... I doubt your lifestyle is a normal one, is it?"

"It no longer is after I chose to write articles for the magazines....."

"Listen to me carefully....."

Ebichiri's heels were echoing loudly along the corridor. As he walked half a step before me, he said harshly,

"Mafuyu is a professional pianist. That means she'll need to maintain her body under a strict regime, just like the athletes do. I do not want to see her falling under your influence after living together with you!"

"Yes, I'm really sorry..... But she doesn't stay overnight at my home all the time. We've only lived together for a day....."

Ebichiri turned around and shot a fierce glance in my direction. We happened to stop right at the gate of the university, so the students walking by were all looking at us in a weird fashion.

"I am not just talking about what happened yesterday. It's also about the future as well!"

"Mmm..... Eh? Huh?"

"Did Mafuyu not tell you she will be shifting the focus of her work back to Japan?"

"Ah, she did."

"Then you two should have talked about the future as well, didn't you?"

"..... Talked about what?"

Ebichiri's face was suddenly overwhelmed by an incoming wave of pity as well as deep despair.

"..... You are indeed the son of Hikawa! I am once again forced to reaffirm that fact..... Back when he was still young, he posed all sorts of troubles for Misako and for the other women as well....."

Eh? Wait, what's going on around here?

The carpark was located right before the school's gates. Ebichiri got into his Toyota Crown, closed the door and drove off in a flash.

Even though feketerigó's glamorous homecoming tour was in full swing when I made the call, nevertheless, Kagurazaka-senpai forced her manager to free up some time so that she could meet up with me. And so during midnight on the eighth of April, we held a secret meet-up session at the Tokyo Dome hotel.

"Our American opponents are really strong. It was a complete failure!"

It had been a while since I saw Senpai. She flashed a wry smile as she gave me a toast using her glass of diluted whiskey.

<feketerigó>, which consisted of Kagurazaka Kyouko (lead vocal & guitarist) and Aihara Chiaki (drummer), made their glamorous debut as a hard-rock indie band five years ago. Kagurazaka-senpai used to dominate the headlines as the rock revolutionary gal. She recently changed her hairstyle to a more mature one, which that made her look even more gorgeous and increased her superstar appeal as well. Worst of all, she looked pretty damn sexy in those robes of hers.

"Isn't it a little too early to enter the American market now? It's not too late to do so after you've gained a firm foothold in Japan."

Senpai prodded my nose when she heard those silly and unnecessary words from me.

"It's never too early. All we need to do is to try again with our new songs. America's a place where they care not about the good or the bad. Only the winners are remembered,

while the losers are duly forgotten — that's what I like about that place. So I'll be heading overseas once more, hitching a ride with my cigars and pies and streaking across the plains beneath the moonlight as I transfer between buses — chasing after my American dream!"

There was not the slightest hint of depression in Senpai's smile.

Even though it was titled as a 'glamorous homecoming tour', feketerigó's record sales in America were far from encouraging. Still, Senpai is a revolutionary through and through, so it's pretty much impossible for her to give up standing on the peak of the world and settle for just Japan.

"But of course, I can consider changing the sequence if you're feeling lonely and want me to stay in Japan."

"It does feel a little lonely if it gets hard for us to meet up..... but what do you mean by changing the sequence?"

"I planned to conquer the world before making babies with you, but I'm okay with swapping the sequence!"

As I held the glass of wine tightly in my hands, I retreated and leapt past the bed, making my way towards the side of the door.

"It took you that long to realize my motives despite coming to the hotel room by yourself in the middle of the night? You're as cute as ever!"

"U-Urm, Senpai..... enough with" the jokes — I shut my mouth before I could finish off the sentence. Unable to look into Senpai's eyes, I turned my back against her while holding the wine glass next to my chest.

That was not a joke from Senpai. The revolutionary of love never lies to herself, and neither will she lie to the world. She really has not change the slightest bit — she'll still cross the boundaries of my imagination with ease and spread her wings like she has always done.

"Relax, Comrade Hikawa. That was just a joke."

Right, one thing has changed though — she no longer addresses me as 'young man'. Not because I've become older, of course, but because she has finally seen me as her fellow comrade.

"Comrade Ebisawa has just returned to Japan, hasn't she? I have no intention of seeing her depressed expressions!"

I turned myself towards Senpai and made my way back to the side of the bed.

"I'll lay my hands on you once I've obtained Comrade Ebisawa's understanding," so it's with a term like that huh? I guess it'll be safer to find a seat as far away from her as possible.

"Are you keeping in touch with Mafuyu? I don't think the news have touched on her return just yet....."

"Not just that, I even met her at Houston."

"Eh?"

"You see, the bonds between us are just impossibly difficult to sever! Our performances happened to be on the same day, so I brought Comrade Aihara along and nonchalantly sneaked into the hotel which Comrade Ebisawa was staying in."

"Do not sneak into the hotel nonchalantly!" That's a crime!

"And the three of us talked till dawn!"

"..... I'm quite envious of that....."

"Comrade Aihara and I had picked up quite a bit of information from our relentless attacks! So you tilt your face to the right when you kiss?"

"W-What? So you bombarded Mafuyu with questions like that!?"

"Nope. That was just me fishing information from you."

"What!?"

"You're as simple as ever! Questions like these are 50-50, so you should know it's just me making it up!"

"How should I know!? That isn't something people typically do!"

"Also, based on the statistics I've accumulated from my experiences, it seems like more people prefer tilting their face to the right!"

For how much longer will I be led by the nose by Senpai? Come to think of it..... "You've kissed enough to do statistics like that?"

"Yeah, but you're the only male I've ever kissed."

"Don't fabricate lies like that! I've never once kissed you!"

Senpai gave a laugh and rolled about on bed.

"Oh, we talked about stuff like that while we were chatting, and it seemed like she was actually getting really worried! She kept wondering about just how intimate we were back in Japan, and even said things like returning to Japan without Ebisawa Chisato after she was done with her tour. So what happened?"

"So you're the reason why she returned to Japan earlier....."

Still..... I was really happy that Mafuyu returned to Japan earlier, and I even get to pick her up at the airport.

"And I heard she won't be leaving Japan any time soon? I see, so that's why you couldn't reject Ebisawa Chisato's request! Well I guess you do need to leave a good impression on your future father-in-law."

I was a little stunned when Senpai pulled us back on topic. Oh right, that's the reason why I gave Senpai the call in the first place.

"That's not really the reason why I agreed to his request..... Moreover, we've already known each other for ages now, so why must I take to heart the impressions Ebichiri has on me?"

"It's okay if you're unaware of that!" Senpai laughed it off with a wave of her hand. "Do fill me in on what's going on then."

It felt like there's something deeper to Senpai's words, but it won't do for me to keep dancing along to her lead either. So I began explaining to her the <Fire-thieving Moths> sonata as well as Kokonoe Hirofume's son, Tooru Charlois.

"A piece composed by Tooru's father huh..... I see, so you're trying to get me to pull some strings?"

"Yeah. I remember there were plans to have him as the producer of feketerigó, right? So

I'm wondering if you're still in contact with him....."

"The plans of Tooru being our producer was blown out of the water after we had a huge quarrel....."

"Eh..... A huge quarrel?"

"The first time we met, Tooru said things like how he wants pretty graduates from the idol academy to join us as the bass and the keyboard..... I don't think he had listened to our music prior to that. In any case, he was trying to force us to accept the plan to transform the band into a typical business unit. So I began rattling about how that idea was incredibly stupid, and I ended up pissing him off....."

But of course! What the hell did you think you were doing, saying stuff like that to a big-shot producer who's almost twenty years older than you? So..... that means it's all just my wishful thinking?

"And after that, Tooru and I became drinking buddies."

"Oh well, I guess the only thing left is to locate Tetsurou somehow— Ehhhhhh? What did you just say?"

Didn't you quarrel with him?

"Isn't there a saying which goes 'Great affection is often the cause of violent animosity'?"

"That only applies to close friends, doesn't it!?" You quarrelled with him on the very first meeting!

"Tooru's too busy to even clean his ass when he's done using the toilet, so I'm not too sure if I can get you to meet him, but I'll try and contact him anyway. I should do it within these two days."

"Thanks a lot, you're a great help."

The greatest assets a man can have is his contacts. I finally came to appreciate this fact only after I had entered the industry. Back when I was young, I'd use to think, "That's what makes us impure as we grow up gradually over the years!" But that's all in the past now.

"You don't have to thank me. You do know I'm not doing this for free, right?"

I was incredibly frightened when I saw the grin on Senpai's face.

"Urm..... well..... I doubt I'll be getting much money off this....."

"I never said I wanted money! How about paying with your body instead?"



I could do nothing but run away when I heard that from Senpai. She was saying that while lying on the bed with only a robe on her. However, as I was retreating backwards in the direction of the door, it opened suddenly and I crashed out of the room.

"I'm back, Senpai! Sheesh, I had to go all the way to the convenience store right across the station to get some mint chocolate ice-cream since they didn't sell any around here— Eh? Nao? What are you doing here?"

"It took you too damn long! You even walked over me as you entered the room, so why are you still surprised!?"

Chiaki was wearing a jersey with plastic bags held in her hands, her eyes opened wide in surprise. She then pulled me up unwillingly.

"So what do you think you're doing here? Look at the time!"

"It's easier for him to assault us in the middle of the night!"

"Senpai! Please keep your mouth shut!" Before I was even done with my retort, the furious Chiaki had already gotten her hands on my collar. The next second, the world turned half a circle around me, followed by my back slamming hard against the ground.

"This hip sweep is for Mafuyu."

Chiaki was already locking my arms with her limbs before I could even speak.

"And this armlock is for me!"

"Ow ow ow ow it's gonna break it's gonna break!"

I could hear the frightening popping sounds from my joints while I explained everything to Chiaki with all my might.

"Why didn't you tell me about Nao's visit?"

"At the very least, inform me about how you're sharing a room with Chiaki!"

"I won't be able to enjoy the sweet moments alone with Comrade Hikawa should I have told you beforehand! And I even sent you out deliberately just so I can do this, Comrade Aihara!"

"You're really terrible! Can you please treasure the only remaining band member?"

"Nao, you're in no position to be saying that since you don't treasure Mafuyu at all!"

Huh? I-Is that so? But I do intend to treasure her properly.....

"Isn't Mafuyu returning to Japan for the long-term? And she should've asked what your plans are for the future, right?"

"Well, yeah....."

"Then why didn't you propose?"

I was stunned. Propose?

"Comrade Aihara, it isn't the best idea to just say something that important to him straight to his face, is it?"

Kagurazaka-senpai shook her head worryingly and sighed.

"But that stupid Nao will never realize this for the rest of his life if I don't say it now! I'll be so sorry for Mafuyu."

"Because now's not the time!"

"Rubbish, it's already way too late. They've been going out for six years already!"

"They'll have to wait till the day when my worldwide revolution succeeds and I shatter this saddening and barbaric system in our civilized society — I'm referring to monogamy."

"We should be aiming for revolutions that are way more meaningful than that! How about inventing a totally transparent drum set where the audience can see the drummer in full view during the performance?"

"I'm looking at Comrade Aihara all the time even as I am facing the audience while we're on stage!"

"Thank you! I love you, Senpai!"

The two members of feketerigó were totally ignoring me as they began their nonsensical conversation. But I wasn't in the mood to listen to them.

"Senpai, Nao looks really depressed!" Chiaki prodded my temple.

"Premarital blues?"

"But they haven't decided on marriage yet!"

Marriage huh..... so that's what Ebichiri meant with his words? Mafuyu's returning to Japan for the long-term, so that's the reason why Ebichiri asked me what I was planning to do in the future?

No, not just Ebichiri..... Even Mafuyu mentioned stuff like that as well.....

"Your expression's saying 'I finally understand now', you know?" Chiaki pulled her face towards mine.

"Mmm, yeah....."

"Well, I'll be nice and interpret it as both Nao and Mafu-Mafu being really busy..... But from what I understand of Nao, I doubt you've even thought about this before, right?"

As what you'll expect from a friend of over twenty years. You do know me well.

"So? Do you want to get married?"

"I don't know."

"You actually said you don't know!? You're just....."

"..... Do I have to?"

"That's not the problem here!"

"May I voice the views of a typical person, however rare it may be from me?"

Kagurazaka-senpai sat herself up and hugged Chiaki from behind.

"There's no point for you to get all heated up over this, yeah? This is the fatal difference between the sexes, a destiny that's carved deep into their chromosomes. Even in death, men will never understand how essential marriage is, so it's not because Comrade Hikawa's incredibly dense up there! However, that's not necessarily the case when it comes to other stuff."

"Really? You heard what Senpai said? That's great for you, Nao!"

I don't quite understand how's that 'great'. Come to think about it, not only was Senpai not standing up for me, it felt like she's dissing me in a really roundabout way instead, wasn't she?

"In any case, you two should get married already! Only then can I wed Senpai in peace!"

Chiaki then chased me out of the room, and I left the hotel right after. It was already late at night, and I was blown about by the strong winds weaving through the towering buildings that stank of exhaust. I crossed the overhead bridge, making my way towards the Suidobashi station. It took me a while before I realized the last train had already left a long time ago.

While standing distractedly at the end of the queue for the taxi, I thought about what Senpai and Chiaki had said. I recalled Mafuyu's unhappy expression as she puffed her cheeks.

Marriage..... me and Mafuyu? What does it mean..... to be married? Visiting the parents of our other half, and introducing them at a restaurant—but Ebichiri and Tetsurou already knew each other anyway. Then Mafuyu and I would get a house, where we'd live together. We'd move over..... prepare for our wedding, send out invitation cards—we'd have to invite a lot of people in the industry, especially when considering Mafuyu. Was that all?

When I finally calmed down, I realized my true feelings.

To be honest, it felt incredibly troublesome.....

Two days later, Kagurazaka-senpai called me in the afternoon. I was at a studio in Shinjuku, splicing all the irritating samples into a tape loop. I mistook the ringtone as part of the sample, and it took me a while before I realized it was actually my phone.

"I got the appointment with Tooru for you. The meeting is..... thirty minutes from now."

"Wha....." I was rendered speechless for a moment, as the news had reached me very suddenly. Thirty minutes? It was incredibly noisy on the other side of the phone. I could

hear the sounds of a train, so Senpai should be somewhere near a station or something.

"Sorry, I'm really busy too. I'm currently at the Nagoya station, and I have a rehearsal later."

"Ah—Sorry for having you call despite your busy schedule."

"In any case, he's only free from two-thirty to three."

"Urm, but..... I'm also in the middle of work right now. This is just too sudden....."

In any case, it seemed like Tooru Charlois was chairing an audition at a certain studio in Shinjuku. Upon further questioning, I realized he was actually in the building I was in. What a lucky break.

"All the best to you. And also....."

Senpai continued on quickly.

"I am really interested in that sonata, if it actually does exist. I like Kokonoe Hirofume as well!"

Senpai was the same as ever. She was great at spurring people on without much effort.

The audition was held in a huge studio in the basement. I did my best to finish my work within thirty minutes, then sprinted towards the lift. I brushed by several people with guitar cases on their backs as I made my way there.

"Hikawa? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at studio C?"

One of the sound engineers whom I was acquainted with, saw me, so I hastily replied, "I'm looking for Mr. Tooru....." I ended up missing the control room, and to make matters worse, I stumbled straight into the main booth. I was dumbfounded when I saw rows and rows of guitar amplifiers, synthesizers and microphone stands. The thick soundproof door then shut itself behind me.

"Next! Eh? Where's his profile at? What's your name?"

A rough voice blared through the monitor speakers, causing me to turn towards the control room. I recognized Tooru Charlois right away. The bridge of his nose was unnaturally high for a Japanese, and his bronzed looks were nowhere close to appearing like a forty-year-old's. Despite having openly renounced his desire to perform on stage,

he still emitted a dazzling aura that befit a main vocalist. It felt as though he could still easily attract enough fans to fill up the Nippon Budokan at any given time. [TLNote: wiki on [Nippon Budokan](#) here]

"Ah, urm..... Good afternoon, my name is Hikawa Naomi." Overwhelmed by his charisma, I began introducing myself meekly, before I even knew what I was doing.

"What are you gonna play? The keyboard? Play a rhythm track for him. Hey! Time's precious, so what are you standing there for? Don't you have the scores there?"

"R-Right....."

I stood before the power switch of the synthesizer and gazed at the chord chart in confusion. Accompanied by the demo track—which consisted of only the guitar, electric drums and vocals—I improvised a piece on the keyboard.

"Add in some harmony. Hum to the tune at the end of the song."

I did as I was told by Mr. Tooru, and leaned towards the microphone to hum the tune briefly. When I was done with my performance, his criticism came after a brief "che".

"That's some shitty technique! You should focus on singing and forget about the instruments! Let's continue..... Huh? You're ending like this?"

"Ah..... urm, pardon me!"

I shouted in a hurry when I saw Mr. Tooru turn his head towards the music director to discuss something.

"I'm not here for the auditions. Urm..... Kagurazaka Kyouko of feketerigó should have spoken to you about this. My name is Hikawa Naomi, and I'd like to speak with you for a while."

Mr. Tooru frowned and stared at me—it was almost like his gaze pierced the glass panel of the control room.

I was then made to wait outside for close to twenty minutes. I almost gave up, and thought of heading back to the studio to finish up my work. I might not be a professional keyboardist, but it was still pretty depressing to have producer Tooru Charlois criticize my keyboard skills.

Being the child of a famous personality in the classical music world—and at the same

time, a mixed-blood—he reminded me of Mafuyu. However, Tooru Charlois chose a very different path from Mafuyu. He severed his relationship with his father completely, choosing to debut in the pop music scene at the age of nineteen. He has written lots of songs for various singers, and all of them have sold very well; but on the flip side, his band has undergone several member changes due to his uncompromising personality. He ended up announcing that he'd never get on stage again.

For a young gun like me, Tooru Charlois was a legend. My stomach hurt when I thought about having to talk to him in person—moreover, I'd be making a rather demanding request of him.

My legs didn't respond, even as the door opened before my eyes. Mr. Tooru stepped into the corridor, nodded towards the higher-ups of the record company and spoke a few words. When he was done, he stepped past me.

"Ah, pardon me! I'm really sorry for interrupting, but I have an appointment with you....."

Mr. Tooru clicked his tongue and shot me a glance as sharp as an owl's.

"I've already pretended to have forgotten about this, so can't you pretend to not have seen me?"

No way? What's with that unreasonable attitude of his? Having failed his pretense of missing my presence, Mr. Tooru resorted to childish tricks in an attempt to shake me off: there was the attempt where he tried to sneak away by asking me to get him a pack of cigarettes, or when he feigned a stomach ache and ran towards the elevator rather than the toilet. In the end, it seemed he had given up on trying to get away from me, as he finally sat down on the chair in the lounge.

"Sorry for making this demanding request, but I have something important to discuss with you."

I was shocked by how my words gradually became less and less formal. Come to think of it, this guy reminded me a little of Tetsurou. Oh yeah, Tetsurou did say, before, that he was acquainted with him.....

"So what's up with Tetsurou? He used to follow me around, sniffing like a pig all the time. Yet, not too long ago, he disappeared all of the sudden."

Mr. Tooru lit a Marlboro as he said that.

"He said he was going to Poland, before disappearing without a trace."

"Oh? So you've followed his footsteps and walked the path of an irritating industry's ruffian? I thought it was strange that Kyouko was acting all sugary sweet over the phone..... Damn it!"

Looks like he really detests me, to the point that he'd burn me with his cigarette if given the chance to do so. What a pain..... But time was running out, so I had no option but to get to the point as carefully as I could.

"Urm..... You should know who Ebisawa Chisato and Professor Katase Ryouichi are..... right? They were both students of Mr. Kokonoe Hirofume—can you please stop that!? It burns!"

He really did shove the cigarette butt in my direction. Are you a kid?

"What? So you're from the College of Music? I don't want to hear anything about my Pops, so scram!"

"Do you..... hate your father..... that much?"

"I said I have no intention of listening any further, didn't I?"

Mr. Tooru stood up and was about to leave, but I sprang up and blocked his path.

"I just hope you'll allow Professor Katase to handle the items of Mr. Kokonoe! He's currently working on the works of Kokonoe Hirofume. You should have the key to the house in Meguro, right?"

"I have no intention of returning to that place, so god knows where I've left the keys! When we were working out the inheritance, the noble family and their opinions were a pain in the ass as well. I plan to raze that house down sometime soon, so stop mentioning that irritating family name!"

It took me a while to understand something.

So the reason Mr. Tooru chose to use "Charlois" as his family name..... was not because it was a stage name. Could "Charlois" be the family name of his mother? He hates the name "Kokonoe," so that's why.....?

"Pop's works are nothing more than just trash, stuff that'll be forgotten as time passes on! Are those geezers at the College of Music so crappy they have to sink their claws into the old stuff?"

With that said, Mr. Tooru began making his way towards the elevator, so I grabbed his shoulder on reflex. Noticing my intentions, he turned around with a savage expression on his face.

"..... What do you think you're doing?"

"Urm, well..... pardon me, but....."

The calm part of me in my brain was whispering, "Stop! What the hell do you think you're doing!? He's a big-shot in the industry! Don't even think about surviving in this industry if you piss him off!"—and stuff like that. But I couldn't swallow what Mr. Tooru had said earlier.

Classical music was not about sinking our hands into old stuff.

"..... I heard..... the song you produced last month....."

Mr. Tooru's slightly-tanned and aged—but handsome—face cringed in skepticism. Behind him, his assistants and staff were all looking at us worriedly. But I continued on.

"The horn section during the huge finale—you took it from the main theme of Kokonoe Hirofume's <Yakushi Symphony>. I've listened to the unreleased album—a portion of it anyway. It's unlikely that you'd use the theme in loops if you weren't paying respect to a certain someone, don't you think?"

A huge sound echoed throughout the basement studio. The guys around us shuddered at the same time.

An ashtray flew towards me, away from the desk Mr. Tooru had kicked with all his might. The ashtray smashed into the ground and broke into pieces.

Under the fearful gaze of everyone, Mr. Tooru disappeared into the elevator. Everyone looked as if they had something to say, but none of them approached me. However, those words of mine—that were interrupted halfway—were still burning in my heart.

Music is not something that harasses someone endlessly. All it does is burn itself deep inside your soul, and remain there unforgotten. That's the power of music. Mr. Tooru should understand that as well, shouldn't he?

When I returned home that day, I put on my headphones and lay down beside my desk. I really regretted what I had done. What the heck was I doing? I actually pissed Tooru Charlois off. After learning what happened, a few of my friends offered me a few words of consolation, while others recommended I take a break from work and go on a spa holiday for a month. There was even a kind someone who introduced me to a writing gig for some porn magazine. I trudged back home in a depressed state, no thanks to all the heart-warming attacks I had received from everyone around me.

What should I do if I've really pissed him off and don't receive any job offers as a result? My highest qualification was only a high school education, and it wasn't like I had any other skills.....

A long time had passed before I realized how late it was. My room was all dark, and it was Mafuyu who came in to turn on the lights.

"Sorry, I came here without asking since you weren't picking up my calls."

Mafuyu sat in seiza in front of the desk and lowered her head apologetically.

"Ah..... Nah, it's okay. I'm sorry I didn't notice."

"Did something bad..... happen at work?"

Eh? Was it that obvious?

"Because Naomi only listens to punk music when you're in a pinch!"

Explained Mafuyu, as she pointed at the CD case of Ramones. I didn't even notice that myself, only becoming aware of it when she pointed it out. Now that's embarrassing. It was as if I hadn't grown a single bit since high school. Actually, that does seem to be the case.

"Mafuyu, I....."

Suddenly, words of unease began leaking out of my mouth.

"I've pissed off an important person, so I may..... not be able to receive any more jobs in the future. So....."

It wasn't the time to talk about marriage yet. My work was incredibly unstable, and I was such an immature brat.

I couldn't help but think about stuff like that, despite the fact that Mafuyu had said nothing about marrying me just yet. However, Mafuyu replied.

"It's okay. I'll be the breadwinner then."

"Eh? Ah, no..... but..... is that okay?"

So she's okay with me being a house husband? I wasn't too comfortable with that idea. Preparing meals for Mafuyu and sending her off to work..... though, that wouldn't be too different from the way things were already.

"..... Can't we let our relationship..... stay the way it is?"

That was a pretty devastating sentence from me. Mafuyu's face reddened in an instant, but there was none of her usual harsh words. With her lips slightly trembling, she moved towards me while on her knees, and laid her cheeks on my thighs.

Her maroon hair slid into the space between my fingers. Even though I couldn't see her expression, I was still depressed by her refusal to look at me.

"Is my presence a bother to Naomi? Is it because there's nothing we can share between us?"

"W-What are you talking about? How can that be?"

Mafuyu lifted her misty eyes and glanced at me briefly, before lowering her head again, rubbing her cheeks against my thighs. We remained silent for a long time as we huddled up against each other.

Finally, I told her what had happened in the past few days. The request made by Ebichiri and Professor Katase, looking up Kokonoe Hirofume and his son Tooru Charlois, and that fascinating sonata as well. Mafuyu lifted her head slowly and listened intently to what I had to say.

When I was done, I passed Mafuyu the photocopied scores Professor Katase gave me.

"..... Can you play this for me?"

Mafuyu nodded, scanning through the notes on the score as she flipped the pages. She then murmured,

"This may be a score for a duet."

I see, it might be so indeed. Regardless of the instruments used, the bass portion was lacking for a sonata. However, if it was a piece that required four hands—a piece that required two to play the piano at the same time—then it all made sense.

Mafuyu sat before the electric piano and flexed her fingers a little. She then placed the score on the music stand and began hitting the keys at a slow tempo.

The inflowing piano was especially frustrating to listen to. The fugue lacked a counterpart, so the tune was forced to move forward endlessly without resolving any of the tension. The endearing melody was brutally fleeting, as though it were a dream that one saw on and off in his shallow sleep, but couldn't remember the details of after waking up. Mafuyu initially played the piece with only her right hand, but later in the piece, she extended her left hand out. The finely segregated notes were turning into glittering particles of light.

Halfway into the piece, the performance suddenly stopped. It felt like I was being strangled.

"I can't, this is impossible to play."

I directed my eyes towards the score. She can't play it? Is it difficult even for Mafuyu?

"I have absolutely no idea how the other half is written, so I have no clue how to play this portion either. That's why it is impossible to play."

I see. That was the sort of view you'd expect from a professional pianist. The portrayal of music isn't based solely on regurgitating what's written in the score. Now, I want to locate the complete score and listen to the piece in its entirety.

All of a sudden, a question appeared in my mind. For argument's sake, we'll assume this was a part..... but why a part?

If we were talking about a symphony, it'd be typical to create separate parts—based on the full score—for the different instruments, as the full score would consist of way too many instruments and individual staves, and could probably only accommodate four bars worth of notes per page. That'd be impractical to use for rehearsals. However, for the sonata in this score..... The modern definition of the term "sonata" is very different from what it used to mean—the current definition is used to describe a solo performance, or some light indoor music that employs a piano, as well as one or two other instruments. Therefore, using the full score shouldn't be too much of a hindrance. However, it was just as Mafuyu said, it was impossible to interpret the song fully without having seen the full

score. [TLNote: From wikipedia, a part refers to the separate printed or manuscript copies of the music for each individual instrument in an ensemble or orchestra]

The problem is..... with the way things are right now, the door to Mr. Tooru is slammed shut. Kagurazaka-senpai had kindly hooked me up to him, and yet.....

I dropped onto my bed in exasperation. Mafuyu sat next to me on the side of the bed and stared at my face.

"..... You're searching for the other parts of that piece, aren't you?"

"Yeah..... but I'm out of options now. I guess the only reason Ebichiri asked for my assistance was because he thought I had some connections with Mr. Tooru."

Unexpectedly, Mafuyu put on a sad expression.

"I would love to play the piece if you can complete it."

I sat up quickly in shock.

"Why?"

"Why..... because the completed work should be a pretty nice piece of music. I do like Kokonoe Hirofume as well."

I was surprised by Mafuyu's words. She said the exact same thing as someone else.

"You're saying the exact same things Senpai did....."

Right after I said that, I realized I made a mistake. Mafuyu's maroon hair flinched.

"Kyouko? When did you meet up with Kyouko?"

"Eh? Ah..... urm..... right after I accepted this request, so..... approximately two days ago?"

"They had just returned to Tokyo from Sapporo on that day, and they even held a concert at the Tokyo Dome that night. So how exactly did you manage to see her?"

Why do you know all the details? Are you keeping track of feketerigó's movement all the time?

"Urm..... she made some time for me, and told me to meet her in her room at midnight."

"At midnight!? And in her room too?"

"Ah! Well..... it wasn't just the two of us, of course! Chiaki was there too."

"Chiaki too?!?"

Why the hell am I digging my grave deeper and deeper?

"Sorry! Well..... It's not like I'm deliberately trying to hide it from you. It's just that I heard about the stuff that happened in Houston, so it's a little embarrassing to tell you what happened....."

"They even told you what happened in Houston!?"

Mafuyu's face was turning redder and redder, probably due to her recalling the sexual harassment Senpai committed against her back in Houston. She grabbed a pillow and began swinging it continuously at my face.

It was the sudden ringtone from my cellphone that saved me.

"Sorry..... Mafuyu, wait! It's a call from the producer, so stop..... shush."

I jumped away from my bed and ran next to the window before picking the call up.

"..... Yes, it's me. No no, I'm not sleeping yet, so it's okay..... Eh? Ah..... yeah..... right, right. About what happened in the afternoon, that was..... I don't know how to put it..... it's just..... Eh? What? Mr. Tooru said that? I see..... No no no, I'll accept the offer. Right..... no no no, of course. Okay, see you."

Mafuyu was confused as she watched me end the call while nodding my head repeatedly.

"What happened? Did he really cut away all job offers from you?"

"Urm, not really—"

In all honesty, I couldn't quite believe the conversation I just had either. I could only stare at my phone in a daze.

"I was..... offered a job. Tooru Charlois was the one who made the request."

It was just as Ebichiri had said when he asked me the question I scrambled to answer; I kept getting job offers that somehow came to me without me knowing why they did. The more popular job requests, though, were for my articles, samples, and music arrangement.

"Here are the sounds taken from the Chuo line; these are sounds from the Tokaido Shinkansen; and those are the sounds from a waterwheel cabin. Use the exhaust from the Harley as the bass, and Bartok's quartet as the background. Get me a loop running before eight!"

Right after I showed up at the studio, Mr. Tooru barked orders at me while pointing at the PC screen.

"Before eight?"

Does this guy here understand the amount of time required to fine-tune samples from non-musical instruments? And I pissed him off just yesterday, didn't I? Why's he seeking my service today? I was dying to ask these questions.

"Quit complaining! I'll pay you, so get your ass moving!"

Some of the audio engineers, as well as the artists who looked younger than me, flashed a wry smile in my direction. Seems like Tooru Charlois's unreasonable demands were not something new.

"Yes, I'll get to it right away."

I bowed, and did my best to put on a really apologetic expression as I sat myself down in front of the PC.

"Pardon me..... but aren't you angry?"

"Do I look like I'm not?"

I shrunk my neck.

"I brought you here to grant you the opportunity to apologize!"

That was so touching I was close to tears. For the next few hours, I was hounded by comments like, "That's not right" and "This won't do," coming from behind me, while also

having my collar pulled from behind. I finally completed a rhythmic loop that consisted of the sounds of the trains, waterwheel, motorcycles and Bartok's quartet, all mashed up together. Who the hell came up with such a combination?

"Wow, Mr. Hikawa's abilities are for real! We'll be depending on you for our next album as well, okay?"

After listening to my finished work, the lead vocalist—who was in his teens—exclaimed that passionately, as he came over to shake my hand. However— "I hope we can use the samples from the right-wing's propaganda vans, as well as the sirens from the American base, in our next project!" It's best you guys scrap that idea of yours, yeah?

That night, Mr. Tooru invited me to a pub in Shinjuku for a beer. To make things worse, it was just me and him alone. Silent films, from way back, played on the huge screen, while jazz, performed by a large ensemble, gently played on the stereos. It was quite a snazzy bar.

"Urm, well..... thanks..... a lot for today."

"What for?"

"Thanks for..... offering me the job."

Mr. Tooru gave a hmmph as he allowed a shot of Bourbon to flow down his throat.

"You graduated from the College of Music?" That was sudden.

"N-Nah, I only have high school qualifications."

"Really? So how'd you know about the alto clef then?"

"Cause you have to know how to read the orchestra scores when you're doing critiques..... So that means Mr. Tooru can read the alto clef as well? That's surprising!"

Alto clef was not a musical notation that you'd learn about in typical music lessons in school. I gradually got used to it only when I began dictating the viola parts when I was adjusting different audio sources.

"I was forced to learn it by my Pops. He'd force me to sit in front of the piano when I was done with school, and he'd beat me up if I stop practicing, even just a little."

"Ah, I see....."

"Even before he forced me to learn the piano, he did the same to my Ma as well. My Ma had never touched the piano prior to knowing him! Pops got to know my Ma at the hospital when he was receiving treatment in France, though she was just a patient as well. I heard the geezers and hags from the Kokonoe family got into a huge quarrel with him since they opposed the marriage."

"Why..... is that so?"

"Well, they'd nitpick about stuff like how my Ma was a foreigner, how her body was frail and how she couldn't ever conceive, stuff like that. Those are the kind of thoughts you'd come to expect from the moldy brains of those old people. Before, Pops had no intention of getting married, despite the fact he was past the age of forty, so the noble family had their eyes set on some suitable candidates, and even arranged for a few match-making sessions. Guess the family opposed the marriage 'cause all their efforts had gone to waste?"

That was just over ten years ago; such practices still existed back then..... I guess, even to this very day, there are still families who are prissy about stuff like that.

"The reason Pops and Ma had me, and the reason Pops made her learn the piano, was so he could get approval from the family. Or at least, that's what my grandpa and grandma said."

Proof that she was essential to him, whether as his wife or his musical partner—but was it really necessary to get approval from his parents for stuff like that?

"Ma died when I was in elementary school, so it turned into a situation where I was forced to sit before the piano. To that person, we were nothing but musical instruments."

I could say nothing in reply to that, so I took a gulp of the bitter cocktail instead.

However..... if that was the case, then why did Mr. Tooru pay respect to the song composed by Kokonoe Hirofume? Actually, let's not bring up that point just yet—why did Mr. Tooru step into the world of music in the first place?

Mr Tooru downed his whiskey in a large gulp, and slammed the glass on the table.

"Do you enjoy taking the trains?"

Another question out of the blue. I turned around and stared at the side profile of Mr Tooru's face, defined clearly by crisp lines.

"..... Not really. I don't like the crowds."

"Me too. But if the sounds of the train were suitable for work, then you'd use them, right?"

I was speechless.

"Urm..... So..... You offered me a job just to tell me that?"

"How could that be!?"

Mr. Tooru elbowed me in my side.

"You honestly have no clue, do you? You know what, I hate people like you as well—people who lack the brains, who are related to a bunch of people from the College of Music, and who just keep pushing themselves onto others. But I've decided to use you, since you're good with the synthesizers. That's all."

I see. That was incredibly depressing. I couldn't even let out a sigh.

"I know that what I'm doing is no different from my what Pops did. This is just disgusting."

So, Kokonoe Hirofume didn't love his wife and saw her only as a human instrument—that didn't sound right. It was just weird. His wife didn't even know how to play the piano before she met him, did she?

And things didn't make sense from Mrs. Kokonoe's perspective either. If things were as Mr. Tooru had said, then why did she cross the oceans to follow that man to Japan, and even decide to marry him? Moreover, all of the relatives in his family opposed the marriage, so why the insistence?

While I was pondering the issue, Mafuyu's depressed expression showed itself again and again in my head.

Why do people get married?

"Well, because..... our wallets will merge into one when we're married, so the cash I owe her will all disappear! You can't do that if you're just going out with her, can you?"

Those are the first words my dad Tetsurou—whom I haven't seen in a long while—said to me when he finally returned to Japan.

"You're just trash..... How much did you borrow off Misako?"

"Don't know. Somewhere around two million?"

"Two million? You borrowed two million back when you were just a college student?"

"Oh well, it's not a lot of cash....."

"How's that 'not a lot'!? Do you know how long two million would last me if I used it to pay the rent for this apartment?"

"Oh yeah, are you planning to move away? Daddy wants to live in a landed property with a courtyard!"

Tetsurou lay on my bed and stretched himself as he took a sip of his canned coffee, scanning the four meter-square room.

"Lil Mafuyu should command a sizeable salary, so how about a house in Tokyo? You'll have to first decide how many children you're planning to have in the future!"

"That's not something you have to worry about, so shut it!"

Why are you worrying about stuff like that in my stead?

"I may turn into a senile old man, so you'll have to have a room prepared to look after old geezers like me. Also, make sure Mafuyu wears a nurse outfit as well!"

You're already a senile middle-aged man, aren't you? Tetsurou's supposed to be the same age as Ebichiri, so why does he forever act like a scrappy student who keeps failing his entrance exam?

"And Misako, why on earth did she wed you..... Ah, so that she can chase after your debts?"

"How rude! We swore to live together till death because we loved each other!"

"Then why the divorce!?" How's that living together till death!?

"So when are you making your vows? Don't invite me to your wedding ceremony! Those

long-winded people from the College of Music will definitely be there as well....."

"Nah..... I'm not planning to hold a wedding ceremony."

"Why?"

"Why..... huh?"

I turned towards the desk; my blank gaze floated towards the laptop screen. I had no idea how to reply to that. Why? I'd love to know the answer myself.

"..... Why is marriage necessary? Mafuyu hasn't even told me outright that she wants to get married. Why is everyone acting like I'm committing some heinous crime if we don't get married?"

There was a sudden snicker. Turning my head around, all I could see was Tetsurou's shoulders trembling nonstop as he sat cross-legged on my bed.

"Because it has to be you who pops the question!"

"Yeah, the guy has to do the proposing. What a silly practice—"

"It's not just a practice! There are actual valid reasons to it. I was the one who proposed marriage to Misako as well!"

"So you took the initiative and said, 'Let's erase all of my debts after our marriage!' Was that it? Really?"

My dad was undoubtedly the worst person on earth.

"Yeah! That's a must. Just..... I don't think you understand right now, do you?"

The way he put it was just infuriating. It sounded like I was still just a kid in his eyes.

However..... I may have been an ignorant brat all this time. At the very least, Tetsurou had gone through this before. Therefore, I couldn't retort despite my desire to. Come to think of it, Kagurazaka-senpai said something similar too.

"In any case, it's love!"

"The love you're talking about is erasing all the debts you owe?"

"Lil Nao, there are many different facets to love! You'll understand it sooner or later. It was the same for that Kokonoe as well! Do you have any idea how many relatives he had? There was enough for three orchestras! Moreover, all of them came from well-to-do families as well. I saw the scene where his relatives were all gathered at his funeral—the atmosphere might've been enough to scare the dead back alive! He chose his wife despite the strong opposition from his parents, his grandparents and his numerous aunts and uncles. Do you have any idea how much resolve was required to do that?"

Tetsurou then walked towards the sound system and took out one of Mr. Big's album from the cabinet. Eric Martin's hoarse voice was accompanied by choppy sounds of the orchestra.

<[Nothing but Love](#)>.

Love..... was something that I thought only appeared in the lyrics of songs. And when that word appeared in a conversation between me and my father—honestly, it's a little disgusting.

"Oh right, you know anything about Kokonoe's wife, Tetsurou?"

I didn't have the slightest clue about her. All I knew was that her name was Rosary Charlois, and that was something I came to know of only recently.

"Nope, I don't. His wife was already dead when I met Kokonoe. Tooru never talks about his mother either, right? The only option left is the relatives of the Kokonoe family."

I sank deep into thought. During this period of time, Tetsurou opened my fridge without my permission and downed a whole bottle of sake by himself. After kicking him a few times and yelling at him, I finally made my request—

To have him introduce me to the publisher of the music magazine.

I was busy with interviews the next week. The amount of information gathered was enough to get a book published. Professor Katase had agreed that the interviews could be used in other areas, so I compiled all the data and reorganized them for an exclusive column. Since the business card of a twenty-four-year-old industry's ruffian hardly holds any weight, I had to get Tetsurou to introduce me to an established music magazine publisher in order to facilitate my data gathering by investigating under the guise of interviews.

But of course, Kokonoe Hirofume's parents are long gone from this world. As for his siblings..... they were all visibly displeased when I visited them in a sharp suit, and none of them were willing to share much. Looks like Kokonoe Hirofume had indeed cut off all ties with his family.

I received only one significant info from one of his relatives — Kokonoe Hirofume has a relative named Wakida, who is the boss of a small trading company.

"It has been a long time since I've visited the Kokonoe family, so my memories are vague in quite a number of areas."

I approached him at his office, and the grizzled but energetic Mr. Wakida greeted me with a smile all the same despite my obtrusion.

"How should I say this..... that family's a really suffocating bunch! My mother is the youngest daughter in the Kokonoe family, while my father comes from a really ordinary family. It's frightening whenever we paid a visit to the Kokonoe family. As for Hirofume, he hardly visits his old home, so our relatives would go all out to talk bad about him whenever they gathered together."

"Was he really dissed..... that badly?"

"Actually, the flak's directed more at his wife, Rosary. The words used were really grating on the ears. I even heard talks about how she's not human."

I was speechless. It's creepy just how racist some can be.

"The talks became worse when Rosary was pregnant with Tooru. Ooku-sama had even cried for several days and nights, thinking that Tooru may be a cursed child born into the family. It felt like we were watching a period drama, really. After that, my father learned his lesson and decided not to set foot onto the Kokonoe household ever again. In fact, we actually got closer to Hirofume and his wife instead." [TLNote: Ooku information on [wiki here.](#)]

I gulped and swallowed the uncomfortable feeling down my throat.

"They said all that just because she is a foreigner?"

"Perhaps because Rosary was ridden with illnesses? I had learned some French in school, so I chatted with her quite a bit — she had frequented the hospital ever since she was a child. Hirofume brought her to Japan and even sent her to a famous hospital here. She felt guilty due to stuff like that, so she always said how things would be better if she

wasn't around. Well, not like you can blame her for that....."

So Madam Rosary was that troubled by so many things huh.....

A woman being all alone on foreign soil, shutting herself in her room all the time — her only consolation was in the shape of books from her motherland.

Despite my depressed feelings, questions continued to surface endlessly in my mind as I recorded the things said by Mr. Wakida.

It seemed like Kokonoe Hirofume was the first one to sever ties with his family.

If so, then Mr. Tooru's view on things does not quite fit into the picture. That's because there's no reason for Kokonoe Hirofume to force Madam Rosary to learn the piano to gain the approval of his family. If that's indeed true, then what's the actual reason behind it?

That night, I made an international call to Yuri in France.

"It's rare of Naomi to give me a call, and in the end it's just to make a strange request:?"

"Sorry..... but there's no one else I can turn to."

"Whatever it is, I'll do it as long as it's a request from Naomi. However, how are you planning to return the favor?"

"Urm..... what would you like? Hmm..... how about an article on the magazine about your album?"

"That won't be necessary. Oh, I'll be heading to Japan soon."

"Eh? Really?"

"Are you happy?"

"Of course I am! It's been a while since we last met!"

"I'm really happy too! The last time we met was November last year!"

It's no surprise, since Yuri is a really famous violinist who's way more busy than Mafuyu.

Moreover, he's French, so his activities will naturally be centered around the European region. It can't be helped.

"Then I'll stay at Naomi's home when I'm in Japan. That will even things out."

"Urm, but..... my house is really tiny, you know? And I have no extra futons for guests as well."

"Then I'll just have to sleep with you! I mean, we used to do it all the time!"

Just once, okay!? How's that "all the time"? And we were still teenagers then! We'll definitely fall off the bed if we're to do that at our current age!

In the end, I gave in to the strangely excited Yuri and agreed to him staying at my home when he comes to Japan. Whatever. That's not really a huge price to pay.

I received Yuri's answer at night on the following day.

"Sorry, I didn't find out anything. I mean, she was a patient decades ago, and there's no way they could give me an answer through the phone."

"I guess....."

I asked Professor Katase for the hospital Rosary Charlois stayed at when she was in France, and got Yuri to checked it out for me. I was originally hoping for information on her family or her illnesses, things like that. It looks like that didn't work out too well.

"Right, urm....."

There was a moment of hesitation when I thought of a possibility, but I went ahead and asked anyway.

"That hospital..... isn't a hospital for mental health, right? Urm, I'm referring to the quarantine wards."

"Nope. Why do you ask?"

She was frequenting the hospital since she was young, and the Kokonoe family had made her out to be some kind of freak — these reasons caused me think in that direction even though there was no concrete reason to. But then again, I doubt she would have met Kokonoe Hirofume if she was placed in a quarantine ward.

"It's a huge hospital with quite a bit of history to its name, and even has facilities catering towards long-term patient care. I think it's a place for patients with congenital diseases."

Patients with congenital diseases. So it is indeed some sort of disease that will draw strange looks from people huh?

I hung up the phone after giving Yuri a muffled thanks through the phone. The uncomfortable feeling remained stuck in my chest.

In order to research more on Kokonoe Hirofume from a musical point of view, I decided to obtain help from Ebichiri in the procurement of information. However, the person to send two paper bags full of scores and information on Kokonoe's famous works was someone rather unexpected.

"I was about to pick the Mistress up, so I came over while making my way there. At the same time, I am here to check on the dire financial situation of Mr. Hikawa, including the shabby condition of the place you are residing in."

A lady in a classy creamy-white suit stacked the huge pile of documents before my door as she spoke in her usual polite and straightforward manner. That's Matsumura Hitomi, Ebichiri's secretary as well as the butler of the Ebisawa family. It's been a while since I last saw her. It looked there was no change to her inexplicably stern personality as well as her serious attitude towards her work.

"You are not planning to live together with the Mistress in an apartment as tiny as this, are you? May I inquire as to your future plans concerning the place you will be living in?"

"Eh? Urm..... w-what?" So even you're asking me stuff like this as well?

"Do you have no plans at all?"

She'll probably frighten the neighbors with a conversation like this so early in the morning, and that's doing it at my doorsteps to boot. But I don't think it's a good idea to invite her into the apartment as well..... I still couldn't come up with an answer even after giving it some thought.

"Well..... since we've not really looked that far into things....."

"I am about to freight the huge amount of the Mistress' personal items from Los Angeles back to Japan, so it will save me a lot of time if you can decide on the details of the

marriage as well as the new place where you two will reside in."

Whoa! Why does it feel so real all of the sudden!?

"Urm..... I do mean it when I say I'm not looking that far just yet. It's just as what you're seeing now, I'm not even sure how I should describe my current work; whether it's as a session musician or a magazine critic. Moreover, my income is not stable for now....."

"I am not sure if you have heard this before, but would you be interested in hearing how Maestro Ebisawa proposed to Madam as a reference?"

That was something unexpected coming from Miss Matsumura, so I took a step out of the door, barefooted. Ebichiri was the one who proposed? I was quite interested, but at the same time, I wasn't sure if I wanted to know more. If I'm not mistaken, Mafuyu's mother should be a Hungarian, and she used to be a professional pianist as well.

"Back then, even though the Maestro was just someone new in the scene and had only won one conducting contest under his belt, he proclaimed to his future wife while conducting as a guest conductor in Hungary, 'I may be conducting with a baton that wields little power for now, and therefore may not be worthy of your hands just yet; but just wait and see — in two years' time, I will definitely become a big-shot conductor and make even the famous and long-running orchestras bend to my whims willingly'."

"Oh really....."

So Ebichiri had his hot-blooded moments as well! Though that was pretty cocky of him.

"The following year, while the Maestro was doing a recording with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, he requested a recording of Liszt's Piano Concertos without the piano purely for personal reasons. Upon receiving the recordings, he gave them to Madam and said, 'You are the only one who's worthy of the solo'."

I was speechless. The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra is not just a representative of Netherlands, but also one of the top orchestras in the world; and they actually accepted the demanding request made by Ebichiri. Then again, wait..... based on what she had said earlier.....

"..... That..... That can't be how he proposed, right?"

"Yes it is. I wonder if it is of any help to you?"

"Like hell it is!"

"Well then, please work harder so that you will become a man worthy of the Mistress, Mr. Hikawa."

I was about to tear from that painstaking effort of hers.

I wasn't sure if it was due to Miss Matsumura's encouragement, but my workload did increase. Following up what happened previously, Mr. Tooru introduced me to more and more jobs. I'm pretty thankful to him for that, but he would grab me for a drink throughout the night every time we were done with our work. He's someone who never gets drunk, so it's no wonder he and Kagurazaka-senpai are drinking buddies.

Thanks to Tetsurou, I'm very used to handling drunkards. However, Mr. Tooru's the type who will never get drunk, so that made it harder for me to deal with. I thought about touching on Kokonoe Hirofume casually when he was in a great mood after a few drinks, but he gave me a punch instead and said, "I said not to talk about my parents again!". His defense was perfect.

Even so, I continued to pursue the subject relentlessly. What I wanted to know most were the things about his mother.

"What has my Ma got to do with you? She was dead when I was still a young child, so I remembered nothing."

"Was this the piece she practiced on?"

I drew out the photocopy of <Fire-thieving Moths> from my pocket and spread it out on the table. Mr. Tooru frowned as he glanced at the notes on the score.

"I can't quite remember! But it's not a song that's as shallow as this."

"Will your father play the piano together with her, or perform a duet with her with another instrument?"

"My Pop's busy hitting my Ma, so how's that even possible?"

I heaved a sigh and removed my palm off the scores.

Kokonoe may be a musician who has created plenty of works, but just like what Ebichiri had said, the works left by him are mostly focused on large-scale orchestra pieces or

ensembles, and none of them were piano pieces. Therefore, I came up with the idea that the song might have been a special song dedicated to Madam Rosary — since it's a score which he carries about in his baton case all the time.

"Why are you so fixated on this? You're offered a large amount of cash by those at the college of music?"

"No, it's not about the money....."

I was unknowingly attracted by Kokonoe Hirofume, and became interested in his wife as well. What sort of people were they? What were they thinking? Why were they willing to be wed to someone outside their country? I didn't know the answer to any of the questions. All I knew was, the incomplete flames in the <Fire-thieving Moths> sonata were still blazing.

Yes, it's that song. That inexplicable song which attracted my attention. And not just me, but Ebichiri, Professor Katase and even Mafuyu as well. We could not pry our eyes away precisely because it's in an incomplete state.

Being deep in thought, I was unaware of the fact that Mr. Tooru's hands had stopped as he was flipping through the scores. It took me a long time before I realized he had extinguished the cigarette in his left hand.

I finally snapped back to my senses when I heard the sound of the papers being crushed into a ball.

"Mr. Tooru? Wha—"

Beneath the scores were the interview reports I had collected and organized together. Mr. Tooru shot a fierce glance at the scribbles on the pages. He would crush the paper into a ball and throw them onto the ground each time he flipped a page over.

And it so happened that the contents were about the things Kokonoe Hirofume's cousin, Mr. Wakida, had said. The woman's not human, a cursed child is about to be born — I had written exactly what Mr. Wakida had said. Shit, what the heck am I doing!?

"Ah, urm..... That's..... well....."

Mr. Tooru tore the whole report into two and stood up.

"What? What are you planning, investigating all the shitty details of my family? Are you trying to mock me?"

"That's not what I have in mind! I'm just trying to understand the thoughts of your parents....."

Mr. Tooru took out a ten-thousand yen note from his wallet and slammed it along with the bill onto the table. He then strode out of the bar. The staff and the customers were all fixing their eyes on me.

I slid down my chair and stretched my weak hands as I gently picked up the score as well as the tattered reports. I could taste nothing out of the lukewarm beer while regretting my carelessness.

During the weekend, Mafuyu was finally able to make time and appeared before my door in the afternoon.

"Why have you prepared lunch already?"

Asked Mafuyu furiously while carrying a shopping bag in her hands. The scent of beef stew, which I had began stewing since yesterday, was drifting from my kitchen to the door.

"Urm, because you said you're coming. I thought it'll be great to get it ready so that you can enjoy it immediately."

You could just tell me on the phone that you'll be bringing some food over.

"You'll stop me if you knew I'm planning to cook!"

"Not only will I not do that, I'll even be delighted about it instead! Well then, I'll store the beef stew in the refrigerator."

As I said that, I gave Mafuyu control of the kitchen and watched her from behind with about twenty percent anticipation mixed with eighty percent uneasiness. I've always thought it is bliss to be able to watch a girl from behind as she is cooking, so I was planning to savor the sight in silence. However, I was forced to step in and stop her as she was about to reach for the sugar while she was preparing the potatoes.

Thirty minutes later, there were four large plates of Spanish omelette on the table, which translates to portions enough for eight. Well, it's obvious that Mafuyu's cooking skills were improving — at the very least, the shapes of the omelettes were getting closer and

closer to that of a circle now.

"It was way better..... w-when I was learning it from Hitomi!"

So Miss Matsumura was actually pretty active behind the scenes! It looks like she had succumbed to the willful whims of her Mistress and did a crash-course lesson on a dish in just a single night.

"Urm..... so that means..... you've only prepared a single dish, right?"

Mafuyu's face turned red as she shook her hands repeatedly. I ended up taking the stew out again to reheat it. As Mafuyu and I stood side-by-side in the kitchen, I sneaked a glance at the side of her face.

She's not angry with what had happened recently, is she?

Actually no, I did not make her angry — or rather, I had no intention to.

I did not even reveal my thoughts to Mafuyu, and there's no way she'll be the one to initiate the talk.

I have zero idea on how I should be feeling while I am proposing, nor do I even know what marriage is all about. What were Ebichiri and Tetsurou thinking when they proposed? What sort of promises were they planning to make? How was it like for Kokonoe Hirofume as well?

The methods of proposal for the three were just mindbogglingly weird — or perhaps I shouldn't be referring to the methods done by people in the musical world? While thinking about that, I nearly jumped out of my seat when I sent the omelette into my mouth. The insides of the omelette was all burnt, so the onions and garlic tasted bitter as a result.

"S-Stop! Eat this instead, Naomi!"

Mafuyu pushed the plate of omelette which she fried last towards me.

Marriage. Marriage huh..... Will stuff like this happen every night after we're married? I was very worried..... even though Mafuyu shouldn't have realized my uneasiness, the dining table was still shrouded by silence and a burnt smell. I originally wanted to ask Mafuyu the reason behind her sudden desire to cook, but then I recalled the words she had said some time ago.

"Is my presence a bother to Naomi? Is it because there's nothing we can share between us?"

There's no need for her to worry about stuff like that! Why must she find a reason to be together with me? Across me, Mafuyu was mashing up the burnt omelette with her spoon. She then looked towards me with a hesitant look. After a while, she finally spoke reluctantly.



"Urm..... I....."

"Hmm?"

"I know I'm in no position to make any demands..... seeing as because of how busy I am with work, we get little time to meet each other. But....."

Mafuyu's head was lowering bit by bit as she said that. Her words faded into a murmur, causing only a faint ripple on the surface of the beef stew.

Though I had no idea what Mafuyu was saying—

But I could more or less understand her feelings. She's feeling incredibly uneasy. But why is that so? Am I not standing beside her just fine? It's not like I'll disappear and leave her all of a sudden!

Next day, Ebichiri called me early in the morning. While confirming the caller on the screen with my droopy eyes, I thought to myself: 'this guy relentlessly checks on Mafuyu whenever she stays at my house for the night, gotta hand it to him and say "It's been tough on you"'. Still, I picked up the call anyway. Mafuyu was already wide awake and practicing on the electric piano with a pair of headphones. Ebichiri's hapless voice came through.

"Professor Katase contacted me earlier. I was told that Professor Kokonoe's house will be demolished today. Do you know about this?"

"Eh!? What!?" I rolled off my bed. Mafuyu turned her head around and removed her headphones.

"The musical instruments which the College of Music had loaned to Professor Kokonoe were stored in his house, but all of them were sent back to the school yesterday. Professor Katase was surprised, so he contacted Tooru. That was when he heard about the demolition work."

"Just the musical instruments? What about the scores and other documents?"

"None. They'll be destroyed with the demolition. Professor Katase tried stopping Tooru, but Tooru told him off and refused to cooperate. Did you never hear him mention this?"

"Nope, never."

My sleepiness vanished in a flash. Mafuyu looked at me worriedly.

"I'll try asking Mr. Tooru. Mmm, okay."

I immediately dialed Mr. Tooru's number after ending the call, but no one picked up. Where on earth did he go? No wait, since the demolition is today, he might be overseeing the operation at the scene.

In any case, I've got to haul myself down to Kokonoe Hirofume's house. I was about to rush out of my room after a quick wash-up, but when I was at the door something tugged at my belt from behind.

"I am coming along as well," said Mafuyu.

"What for?"

"Because I took a day off just to be together with Naomi, but..... if you're not around....."

"Urm..... You've no idea where I'm heading to, do you?"

"I'm still coming along regardless."

I stared into the ceiling while heaving a sigh. Tons of questions streaked through my mind — how should I explain to Mr. Tooru about Mafuyu if he were at the scene? What can Mafuyu do even if she's there with me? Will she slap me if I refuse? But then again, the insistent Mafuyu looked especially stunning.

"..... You're not planning to head outdoors with your pajamas on, are you?"

"Ah! I'll..... I'll prepare myself right away!"

As I walked out of the apartment and waited for Mafuyu at the door, I recalled the words Kagurazaka-senpai had once said.

This is the fatal difference between the sexes, a destiny that's carved deep into their chromosomes — there's only one real example which I am aware of.

The time girls take to get themselves prepared is longer than anything a guy can imagine.

After boarding the Yamanote train, I began filling Mafuyu in on what was going on. In order to explain Mr. Tooru's sudden decision to demolish the house, I revealed the incident which happened to Rosary Charlois' report. Mafuyu listened in silence with a stony expression on her face.

Is Mafuyu regretting her decision to follow me? However, as I was explaining everything to her, I was somehow really thankful for her presence. I think I'll probably explode if had to face the wreckage of what used to be Kokonoe Hirofume's belongings alone.

It's a fifteen minute taxi trip when we descended the train at the Meguro station. We passed by a residential street illuminated by soft, filtered sunlight. The street consisted of bungalows and two-story buildings with spacious courtyards. The abrasive silhouette of the cranes and gravel trucks appeared before our eyes all of a sudden. Mafuyu and I quickly got off the taxi.

"I'm sorry, wait! Please wait!"

I gave a yell while standing next to the gatepost. The workers in their safety helmets turned around and looked at me with a surprised expression.

"This is the house of Mr. Kokonoe, isn't it?"

I pointed in the direction of the tranquil Japanese-styled wooden bungalow.

"Yeah! What do you want?"

"There are plenty of important documents left in the house! Urm..... I am a friend of the owner of this house!"

"You're talking about Kokonoe Tooru?"

"Yeah, that's right? He never came down here even once?"

"Why would he? We're here under the request of Mr. Kokonoe to demolish the house. It's our job to clear the stuff inside as well."

I fished out my phone and called Mr. Tooru once more. However, my ears were sadly greeted by the ringing tone and my sweat. What sort of bullshit is this!? You're planning to bury everything into the ashes in silence? And you're happy with that? You don't talk to your parents much, do you? There're plenty of fragments left by them in this very house, aren't there? The song which could not reach you just yet is currently echoing in

this house, and yet you're planning to destroy everything just like that? When I regained my senses, I realized I had transformed my burning thoughts straight into words. The ringing tone was long gone, replaced by background noise along with a person's heavy breaths.

I stopped talking and transferred the phone to my left hand.

"..... You're freaking noisy. What do you think you're doing, yelling into the phone like that?"

Mr. Tooru spoke bluntly. However, I could detect a trace of wavering in his voice.

"I'm at Meguro right now."

My voice was getting increasingly agitated, but I tried my best to stop my voice from breaking.

"Please stop the demolition work right now! The house is still....."

"There's nothing left in the house! All that's left is trash. I've already returned the instruments back to the College, and I saw nothing about those scores which you're talking about. Anyway, Pops would burn away all the draft notes after he was done with his compositions."

"But that doesn't mean you can destroy everything just like that! There may be something valuable hidden inside....."

"There's none! I'm only interested in the works of Pops, and he has long released all the works which he was satisfied with. Whatever's left in the house are nothing more than paper scraps."

"There's still one! The sonata which I showed you before, the one which you had no memory of!"

"Who cares!"

And the call ended just like that. There was a pang of sorrow which almost severed my wrists, and surged its way into my heart.

Just then, I heard a rough shout in my other ear.

"— Hey! Miss! What do you think you're doing?"

Turning my head around, Mafuyu was stopped by two workers just as she was about to dash towards the bungalow by making her way through the gate and onto the courtyard.

"Please! Let me in! There's a very important score inside!"

I squeezed myself through the gate and sprinted towards Mafuyu. Why so reckless — but that thought of mine disappeared in a flash when I saw the side of her face. What the hell am I doing, still being all calm and collected? Now's the time to force our way through, isn't it?

"Please! I..... I am a journalist of a music magazine!"

I force my name card into the hands of the workers.

"Have you guys heard? A composer used to live in this house. There're still lots of unreleased, precious scores that are left in the house — it will be a huge loss if we can't retrieve them! So please, spare us some time to look for the scores!"

"It's not like we can do anything....." "Yeah....."

The two workers exchanged looks with a disturbed expression. The few other guys gathered around them as well.

"Who on earth are you people?" "How can we possibly allow you in just like that?" "This is the house of Mr. Kokonoe, you know....."

"I've explained everything earlier.....! We just want to look for a score, honest! So please!"

"Please! We have to find it at all costs!"

Upon seeing Mafuyu close to tears, the guys around us were beginning to show signs of hesitation as well. I myself could not believe what I saw. Why is Mafuyu giving her all in assisting me?

"Hey, you guys, that girl appeared on TV before, hasn't she?" "Ah, yeah! That pianist?" "So she's the one?"

A few whispers began to surface. I was incredibly grateful for Mafuyu's fame.

"Are the things you're looking for really in this house?"

The oldest, and who seemed to be the foreman among the lot, frowned as he popped the question. I couldn't answer him straight away. While staring at my toes, I decided to answer him truthfully.

"..... Actually..... we're not sure as well. But if we don't try....."

"We've lots of work to do as well. It's not like we have spare time to waste!"

"But....."

As I lifted my head, Mafuyu stepped forward in silence and stood before me. All she did was stare at the tanned face of the foreman without saying a word.

And the first to break eye-contact..... was the foreman.

"You've got thirty minutes."

My heart almost leapt out my mouth when I heard his mutter.

"Give it up if you can't find anything!"

The corridor facing the courtyard was filled with dust. The windows to the corridor were opened, leading me to wonder how long it has been since the house was vacated. The courtyard was filled with weeds, while the rocks along the sides of the walls were stained with dried moss.

Mafuyu and I entered the house through one of the doors at the side and began our search. I wasn't sure if the house was stripped of its contents, or if there weren't much things around to begin with. Either way, there was nothing left in the kitchen and living room.

As we pulled aside the door deep in the left area of the main wing, we were greeted by bookshelves which filled up the four walls of the room, as well as a carved wooden arabesque box that was placed on the carpet. A bottle of ink was placed on the stand, though the tip of the pen that was in the bottle had already hardened due to the ink drying up. As we circled the room, we realized the wooden box was actually a reed organ instead, and it actually looked pretty old. Mr. Tooru, you're actually planning to destroy an instrument as precious as this? But now's not the time to be thinking about the organ just yet.

The smell of aged paper drifted towards me as I opened up the bookshelves. The spines were either in French, German or Italian. I drew them out to check on the contents — they were scores by Debussy, Ravel and Franck. Moving onto the shelving below, were works by Telemann and Buxtehude. All of them were scores that are easily available on the market. Even as the stacks of scores began accumulating on the wooden floor, I was still unable to find any handwritten stave notes or its related information. Were they really all discarded already? But that song — that particular song should still exist somewhere out there. That's because it wasn't a piece he composed for mass release. It must be around here somewhere. I quickly flipped through each and every set of scores in an attempt to locate anything between the pages, but I only succeeded in stirring up the dust as the loosened pages fluttered their way to the floor. I then moved on to another bookshelf. There was nothing in the shelf other than scores that were kept neatly inside, and all it took was a look to confirm the fact that there were no notes or sticky memo stuck in between. Even so, I took them out anyway and roughly flipped through the pages all the same. Is it really just wrong speculation on my part? Can that really be just a rough work and not a completed fugue? The multitude of words encased within the phrases, the unique piano notation — was it all just wishful conjectures by us? What about the counter-melody, dancing around the main theme like a group of illusory moths fluttering around a serene bonfire; was the boisterous scene of the oceans of the night we saw nothing more than an illusion?

Just then—

Came the sounds of the piano.

I dropped the scores in my hand. As I lifted my head, I could feel the deep whispers coming into contact with my nose as they closed in and left. It's the sound of the piano. I heard things right.

Oh right, where's Mafuyu? She's not with me in this room?

It was only then that I began searching for Mafuyu, though my response was pretty damn slow. I rushed out of the study room, past the dusty corridor and towards the gushing source of the piano notes. I then pushed aside quite a few windows made of frosted glass and burst through the stinging, stale air.

The low corridor brought me to an isolated building. For some reason, the door was the only one of western style, and on it was a semi-circle scuttle which spread outwards. The gentle yet stubborn bass of the piano was flowing out of the slightly opened door. It felt like my warmth and heartbeat were sucked away by sounds as deep as the oceans, causing me to freeze on the spot.

I slid my body quietly through the door into the room. The room had a faint disinfectant smell, and there was a bed next to the wall. The sun shone into the room through slits of the curtains. There was a dressing table painted in white, a small bookshelf next to a cabinet filled with medicine bottles and the covers of scores, an upright piano, and the maroon hair that was swaying before the piano.

For a moment, I forgot to breathe.

Mafuyu's left hand was dancing above the keyboard. A few sheer pieces of paper were placed on top of the piano music rack, and it looked as if they were formed by pressing flat the cold, misty breaths which appear in a winter's early morn. It's a two-staff score. Looking through the scores, the surface of the piano was like the night sky, while the four b notations were shining like the stars. And that's non other than — A_b major chord.

But of course, I knew that much even without looking at the score. I could almost see the flock of moths fluttering above the sounds of the ocean waves summoned by Mafuyu.

I tried my hardest to suppress my footsteps and approach Mafuyu as gently as I could. She stopped playing and turned around to look at me. From the looks of her eyes, it felt like she was in a trance; it's as though her soul had left her body.

"..... So you've found it."

Mafuyu nodded to my gentle words.

"Did you bring the score along with you?"

I took out a few pieces of folded paper from my pocket in response to her question.

That was when I noticed something — despite his agitation, all Mr. Tooru tore were the investigation reports. He did not destroy the scores that were placed on top.

Is it because that deep within him..... he knew the score was something of huge importance?

Mafuyu took the scores and laid them on top of the keyboard, while I looked from behind her.

"Piano four hands..... No, there's way too much overlap in the music range. So it should be a piano duet?"

Mafuyu shook her head.

"No. It is a solo."

My eyes were fixed onto her beautifully shaped ears.

"How can you tell?"

"It is obvious from the score."

She took the photocopied score and clipped them behind the scores placed on the stand. I was stunned. What Mafuyu found were actually scores that were written on pieces of tracing paper. The treble clef against the treble clef, the bass clef overlapping the other bass clef. The words and song were silently mashing up together as one.

I held my breath. The incredibly sheer tracing paper merged the two scores together as one, and the A \flat major piano sonata had thus formed right before me amidst the night sky. Mafuyu's right, this is indeed a solo piece. It's pretty obvious from the elegant notes on the scores. My intuition turned into confirmation when we reached the final page. Also, located at the end of the score was a word written before the "ensemble".

toujours ensemble

Mafuyu and I had no idea what the phrase meant. All we knew was, it wasn't musical terminology. If it's not a message from a musician, then it must be a personal message from Kokonoe Hirofume.

When she was done stacking the eight pieces of scores together and reading through the composition briefly, Mafuyu placed her delicate fingers onto the keyboard once more. The fluttering moths reappeared above the surface of the ocean yet again. It felt like I was getting sucked into the gentle and endless night once more.

Why did Kokonoe Hirofume choose to split the piano sonata into two? Why not grant it freedom to soar in the broad skies instead of locking up half of its wings in the room filled with the memories of his wife? The reason for that..... it felt like I could almost reach it, but it was still not quite within my grasp.

The stuff he was trying to hide, the things he was trying to protect, what he was trying to retain—

The sounds of the piano were severed all of a sudden. I surfaced myself from within the ocean in the night and made my way to the shores. I found Mafuyu looking at me with a

sorrowful expression in her eyes.

"W-What's wrong?"

"I cannot play on..... any further."

"Why?" This just feels like I was being abandoned in a dried-up coral desert all of a sudden.

"It is technically impossible to do so."

Mafuyu pressed her hands hard onto the overlapping scores, against the stand.

"I originally thought the lowest pitch of the scattered chords can be played with the assistance of the left hand, but right here — it's a continuous stretch of octaves. It is quite impossible to play despite my repeated attempts."

My eyes were once again fixed on the hazy trebles of the score. Located above the moths which were fluttering along the fringes of the flames, was a clue formed by the various memories and words.

The two who met at a hospital in a foreign land; the wife who was claimed to be 'inhuman'; the two parts of the hidden score; the piano sonata which could not be played, even by Mafuyu — the answer lurks deep in the darkness.

There was a squeak from the door behind us, causing Mafuyu and I to turn our heads around at the same time. A few coughs were heard — I could see a few workers in their overalls and helmets freezing in their spot. They lowered their gaze when they noticed my and Mafuyu's gaze.

I lowered my head and apologized immediately when I saw the time on my cellphone.

"We are terribly sorry, it's way past our agreed time....."

"Urm..... it's okay. Just a few minutes late."

"You're not gonna play on?" "The song's not over yet, is it?"

Mafuyu and I exchanged looks.

It is impossible to play for now — the tiny room was filled with a regrettable, but at the same time assured atmosphere when Mafuyu murmured her answer apologetically.

"..... So you guys..... found what you want?"

Asked the foreman in all seriousness.

Mafuyu nodded and hugged the stack of scores before her chest.

"Just those few pieces of paper? You're not gonna bring these things here away?"

The foreman walked towards the bookshelf and pulled out a few books randomly. I leaned my body in his direction in surprise. The aged and thick cover of the book was stamped with the word 'Seiyoudou'. It's the name of the bookstore where Hirofume Kokonoe's cousin, Wakida, was tasked to pick up a few books from.

I took the book from the foreman and flipped through the pages. The French I knew was limited to musical terminologies, so there was no way I could understand the contents. However, I could still make out a bit of what I was reading based on the diagrams. The content was on music theory and piano playing, as well as how to play in an orchestral setting.

A French book purchased and kept by Rosary Charlois — upon confirming each and every spine found in the bookshelf, I realized they were all books related to music.

I spewed out the breathe that was held in my chest and returned the book back to the shelf.

"You okay with leaving them here?" whispered the foreman. "We'll take it as you throwing them away if you're gonna leave them here."

I shook my head weakly.

"..... Those scores..... are more than enough."

I turned my head around and gave a nod to the uneasy Mafuyu.

I had finally understood everything — the thoughts of Kokonoe Hirofume.

During the weekend, I managed to catch Mr. Tooru at the elevator next to the entrance of the record building. It was evening then.

"..... You again?"

Mr. Tooru was wearing a pair of high-profile orange shades, which matched well with his high nose bridge and his fair skin. I almost hastily retreated at the sight of him. Just as the door of the elevator opened to the bell, I circled Mr. Tooru from his back and blocked his path.

"I've no desire to see you. You're always sticking your nose around! It's best you disappear from my sight, you bastard, or I'll make sure you can't survive in the music industry anymore!"

I took a gulp and shrunk a little. However, the door of the elevator closed just then, shutting off my path of retreat. Mr. Tooru and I were the only people left in the two square-meter wide space.

"I am not making any request to you. I just hope you can listen to this."

I fished out a portable recorder from my pocket. Mr. Tooru opened his mouth, but then froze on the spot when he heard the piano melody that was flowing out from the recorder.

That was not the incomplete half which I showed him back then, but the completed A♭ major piano sonata created by the overlapping of multiple recordings, all played by Mafuyu's 'mercury fingers' — [Sonate pour deux](#). The frowning Mr. Tooru tried to reach his finger for the button to open the doors of the unmoving elevator.

"Please listen to it until the end!"

I moved my body to obstruct Mr. Tooru's hand, but he grabbed me by my collar instead. He slammed me against the buttons, and the floor beneath us began to rise. Mafuyu's piano began pacing into the serene development in E-major, as though it were responding to the movement of the elevator. Mr. Tooru's eyes were gradually losing their warmth behind his orange glasses.

Then, the first theme of the fugue finally returned, together with strings of fragmented stars above it.

What followed after is the part where Mafuyu failed to play solo even with her sublime skills. As Mr. Tooru shut his eyes, I could feel the strength gradually seeping away from his hands.

The double fugue spiralled repeatedly amid the drizzling rain of the shrill vibrato. The

instant where the sonata was sucked clean by the finishing chord, it just felt like my hand and the recorder in it were about to melt and crash to the ground.

The elevator stopped at the seventh floor.

The elevator probably stopped somewhere in between, but Mr. Tooru and I were both too spell-bound by the piano sonata to notice anything.

As the strength left my knees, I leaned my back against a corner and slumped to the floor. As for Mr. Tooru, he pressed the open button and stepped past me into the hallway. I hastily picked up the ice cold recorder, hugged it in my chest and gave chase. I finally caught up with him at a staircase devoid of people.

"You should..... have remembered it by now, right?"

My question landed on Mr. Tooru's back, who was beneath the faint green glow of the emergency exit sign.

"Remember what?"

"The song..... played by your mother..... should be this song, shouldn't it?"

"..... So it is, but so what?"

"Please, just answer me this once. Did your mother play this song alone?"

Mr. Tooru shot a fierce glare at me through his sunglasses as he frowned and grunted. My shoulders were slammed by an unpleasant click of his tongue. He then prepared for his descent down the stairs.

"So what? There's no way she won't know how to play, seeing how Pops forced her to."

It felt like there was something jammed up in my chest, which resulted in me being half a step late in my chase for Mr. Tooru.

That's right. That's the answer — the truth hidden beneath Kokonoe Hirofume's piano sonata in A \flat major.

And I am about to reveal the secret right now — but would that be a correct move or not? I wasn't too sure.

Either way, I pulled out the score from my pocket and spread them out before the eyes of

Mr. Tooru, blocking his path in the process. That was the completed score — the score created by overlapping the parts together.

I evade Mr. Tooru's swatting arm and point to the last page of the score.

"Please take a look at this. There are five voices to the fugue at the coda, and the thrills are repeating on and on. Since the left hand is stuck to playing the octaves, that means the middle ranges will have to be played by the thumb, index and middle finger of the right hand — but that's impossible, because there's just not enough fingers to do so."

Mr Tooru stopped in his tracks. The colors in his eyes had all but vanished at that point.

"There is only one person who can play this sonata — Rosary Charlois, your mother. I am not sure if you know this or not, and this is just conjecture on my part. There's no concrete proof, but I can't think of any possibility other than this — your mother probably suffers from polydactyly."

I continued my words despite the contorted expression on Mr. Tooru's face due to his confusion.

"I think there's probably an extra finger around the fourth or baby finger on her right hand. It's a congenital disorder..... though that's not quite the correct term. Since she's able to play the piano with it, it must mean that the finger is fully developed. However, the discrimination from others was still there. The Kokonoe family was probably very persistent about insignificant details like that. In order to stand against their discrimination, Kokonoe Hirofume cut off all ties with his family."

"What bullshit are you talking about!?"

My words were interrupted by the deep, hoarse voice of Mr. Tooru.

"If what you say is true..... then Pops is really someone..... who treats my Ma as a human instrument, isn't he? Forcing someone without any musical background to play the piano....."

"That's not it! Do you still remember who Mr. Wakida is? He's the cousin of your father. I heard this from him, that Madam Rosary had purchased plenty of books on the piano and music, and she even read orchestra music theory! There's no way she'd do things like that if she's forced to play the piano! She must have done it because she wanted to respond to her husband's music....."

"So what!?" roared Mr. Tooru, his neck red from anger. "So Pops got all complacent and

deliberately wrote something which can't be played by a normal person for her? That guy's brain is filled with only music, and that's the reason he brought my Ma all the way from France to Japan! He's just human trash!"

I shoved the first page of the score right before Mr Tooru's eyes.

"If that's the case, then he should have released this work way earlier, shouldn't he? Why go through the huge trouble of splitting the score into two to hide it, despite it being such a wonderful composition? The score for the right hand was kept in Madam Rosary's room all this time, while the score for the left was placed in the baton case of Kokonoe Hirofume, which he carried with him all the time. You should understand what this means, shouldn't you? Here, look at the title."

With a force strong enough to pierce through the papers, I pointed my finger towards the 'Sonate pour deux' located somewhere near the title. Professor Katase said it probably meant a sonata duet, but he was wrong. This is definitely a solo, and Mafuyu proved that. That was why, right now, I can be very certain of what it meant.

"It's a sonata written for two. In other words, it's a sonata which existed solely for the couple."

Kokonoe Hirofume had written the piece solely for Rosary Charlois. For his dear wife, who came to a place far away from home; who was filled with unease, not knowing if she should stay right by the side of her dearest one.

To create a reason for her to stay by his side.

And to create a place where she belongs. Something which is meaningful only with her existence.

As for Rosary, she probably played that song for one person alone — for her husband.

Years pass by, and the two are no longer around. To be honest, I'm not too sure if I'm doing the right thing by awakening this song from the debris and ashes.

However, if we must find someone to accept the song, then there's probably only one person who has that right.

Mr. Tooru brushed my shoulders aside and headed towards the bend, so I hastily shoved the bundled score into his chest. With his back facing me, Mr. Tooru removed his sunglasses, his footsteps gradually went downwards and faded into the darkness.

The only thing I could hear were the sounds of my heartbeats and my painful breaths.

A sense of helplessness came surging through my body. I gripped hard onto the recorder in order to endure the discomfort.

Is this all just me..... poking my nose into something which I shouldn't have? There is no real need to convey the fragments of truth to others since it will only bring with it pain. And even if I did convey it to someone, it only means I've gathered all the pain into a single container.

But did I convey it successfully?

I could only hope it managed to move Mr. Tooru's heart, even if just a little. Not by my powerless words, but by the sonata which Mafuyu had summoned for my sake.

Pressing the portable recorder right onto my chest once again, I reaffirmed my feelings once more before I opened the door of the staircase. The bells of the elevator; the chatters and footsteps of the commuters — as I was surrounded by the sounds of reality once more, the prickling sounds of life awakened a sense of nostalgia within me.

That night, I made a call to Mafuyu. Right when I said the words "I'd love to see you tonight", I was greeted by a bunch of strange noises from her side. It sounded like she knocked into something, or perhaps that was the dissonances from her piano? But why the huge surprise?

"W-Why?"

"Why are you asking..... why?" — I was close to asking her that, but I reflected on myself a little. Come to think of it, I do rarely say stuff like that to Mafuyu. It has always been her coming over to my house whenever she can find the time to.

"I wish to see you right now. Urm..... are you in a rehearsal? Tomorrow's the start of your solo tour, isn't it?"

"Mmm..... it is. P-Please hold on! I will ask my manager!"

"Ah— It's okay. If you're really tight on time....."

"I will definitely find time!"

Then a flurry of steps, followed by Mafuyu's conversation with someone else. So..... she actually didn't hang up the phone? Oh, whatever.

And it seemed like she had barely managed to squeeze out some time for me. I thus made my way to the music hall to meet Mafuyu.

"What's..... with you today?"

Mafuyu, who was sitting alone before a majestic grand piano in the middle of the soundproof practice room, seemed to be a little fidgety. She was rehearsing with the actual costume for the performance (something very common for the easily nervous Mafuyu), the pale pink dress with its neckline right down to the shoulder made Mafuyu look especially cute. That just made me feel even more remorseful than ever. To think she was that surprised just from me wanting to meet her. Sorry for being a man who doesn't usually show his affection.

"It's nothing really..... Urm, just something minor....."

Even so, I had no idea how I should get the ball rolling, so I ended up talking about the things related to Kokonoe Hirofume's piano sonata. There was a brief moment when Mafuyu was putting on a really disappointed and obvious 'so you came all the way here just to tell me this?' expression on her face, but in the end, she was quite interested in the developments as well. She even asked a few questions of her own.

"So the piano sonata will not be included in Kokonoe Hirofume's documentary?"

"Mmm, Professor Katase mentioned specifically it won't."

That's because it's a song which belongs only to the Kokonoe couple. As for the handwritten score by Kokonoe Hirofume, I actually handed them to Mr. Tooru without any prior consultation from anyone else due to a brief moment of fervor in me. Thank goodness Professor Katase was understanding on that matter.

"So you do not have the score with you? I cannot memorize it just by playing it once. I was originally planning to play the whole song by skipping a few notes....."

Mafuyu pouted. Looks like she's really in love with the song. Well, so am I.

"I've copied it beforehand! The reason I came here was so that I can pass it to you!"

I passed the score, together with the clear folder, to Mafuyu. Despite her murmuring something like, "Just for this?", she went back to her seat all the same and opened the

scores. Prior to handing the score to Mr. Tooru, I had already scanned a copy of the song. The score which I passed to Mafuyu was created after skipping and rearranging a few notes in the original.

"I've worked really hard to rearrange this. I may be an incompetent composer, but simple stuff like this shouldn't be too difficult for me."

Mafuyu spent a few minutes to read through the score carefully. She then heaved a sigh to soothe her nervousness. Next, she lifted her two hands — her fingers began dancing on the black and white keys.

Even though there were just a few notes that were changed, Mafuyu's playing style was way different from the one she had when she was playing for the multiple recordings used in Mr. Tooru's version. It was as though she were counting each and every ripple on the surface of the ocean, allowing the moths to rest on her fingertips before she sent them off towards greater heights.

This is not a song which exists for me, and neither was it for Mafuyu. However, the only thing I wanted to do right now was to engross myself in the music.

The flock of fluttering, shining moths had finally reached the end of the story, disappearing without a trace in an instant. Then there's the two words which I had copied straight from the original, overlapped score.

"toujours ensemble"

"So..... what exactly do these two words mean?" asked Mafuyu as she lifted her head to look at me.

"Mmm, it's actually not a musical term. You see....."

Mafuyu's eyes widened when she saw what I had taken out of my pocket. It was a platinum ring with a calm shimmer, and the inner side of the ring was carved with the words 'toujours ensemble'.

"It's a phrase commonly used during a proposal. There're lots of different styles of carved rings, so it took me quite some time to decide on one!"

Her sapphire eyes were wavering between my face and the ring. Mafuyu's eyes were getting wetter and wetter; her lips were trembling. I held onto her right hand so as to share her trembles as well. For a painfully long period of time, we were just communicating with each other through our eyes. Finally, Mafuyu timidly lifted her ring

finger ever so slightly.

I could feel a blazing pulse when I slotted the ring onto her finger.



"Urm..... well....."

I couldn't even speak properly. My chest was burning all the way to my neck.

"Actually..... my real reason in meeting you today is to give you this. I did my homework, and it seems like Europeans wear their wedding ring on their right hand. Since Mafuyu's half-Hungarian, it should be this hand all right. And then....."

"W-Why do you know the size of my finger?"

Why is she asking something so insignificant at a time like this — is it because of the mess of emotions she's experiencing right now? Then again, why am I thinking about such stuff calmly at a time like this!?

"I measured it in secret when you were asleep. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"D-Dummy!"

As Mafuyu was about to lower her head once more, I bent downwards and pressed my forehead against hers.

"Sorry for making you worry about so many things. I will..... urm..... do my best..... not to make you feel uneasy ever again."

So..... please marry me.

My proposal landed onto the back of Mafuyu's hands. What followed were drops of tears.

Mafuyu..... is crying?

I was planning to look from below, but Mafuyu turned her face away instead.

"Sorry..... Urm..... Did I shock you?"

"..... I am fine."

"But..... w-why are you crying then.....?"

"You idiot!"

Mafuyu stood up. Her tears fell onto my face.

"I am crying because I am happy! Why can't you even understand something as simple as that!?"

"Ah..... S-Sorry."

I tried to stand myself up with the help of the music stand, but it ended up with me scattering the scores onto the floor instead.

"Whoa! I'm sorry....."

I picked up the scores in a frenzy, but Mafuyu tapped me lightly on my shoulder instead.

"It's okay! Just get out for a moment, and don't come back till I say you can!"

"Eh? W-Why?"

Mafuyu kept pushing me from behind till I was at the door of the practice room.

"B-Because..... my face is in a mess right now! My eyes are swollen, my make-up is all messed up, so..... Just get out for now!"

Despite her saying that, Mafuyu hugged my shoulders as I was about to open the door. She planted her warm and wet cheek tightly against my back.

Her murmurs did not reach my ears; instead, they were conveyed straight to my heart.

Once I was on the corridor, I shut the door of the room and immersed myself in the heat emitted by my earlobes, my neck and my fingertips. Which of these were from my body? And which of these were the warmth from Mafuyu's body? I can't tell. Shit, I can't stop my heart from thumping wildly. If there's a microphone and a bass around here, I'll probably transform back to when I was sixteen and begin to yell away all the heat I'm experiencing.

But I am twenty-four right now. It may be late, but I have gradually come into grasps with many important things. And what I have learned today is this—

Our tears are the most beautiful when we are happy.

I opened up the score of the piano sonata in A \flat major, which was in my hands all this while, and flipped to the last page. I then gently caressed the final phrase written in the song.

"Together forever <toujours ensemble>".

Those were the words Kokonoe Hirofume gifted Rosary Charlois when she left the hospital and crossed the oceans to arrive at a foreign country far away from home.

It's natural to feel uneasy when you are at foreign place where your only dependence is your lover. The fear will reside deep in everyone's heart.

That's the reason why we make an oath.

Swearing to be together, swearing to become the place where the other lives in.

The revolutionary of love used to say this — words alone can't touch the hearts of others. That's the reason why we need to make a powerful oath. Now I finally understand — the reason Kokonoe Hirofume created the piano sonata; the reason Ebichiri gave that baffling recording to Mafuyu's mother. I think I also understand why Tetsurou borrowed that huge amount of cash from Misako as well.

It's all just so they can convey this message deep into the hearts of their loved ones — you are essential to me.

There're plenty of ways to go about doing this. Composers and conductors can seal the promise with a powerful imprint named music. But it's not the gift that is important, nor does one really have to think deep about what to give. So long as you convey the message of 'staying together forever'; as long as you can decisively come up with a promise which will eliminate all traces of loneliness and uneasiness, that's more than enough. That's why I've resorted to an ancient practice, to allow my blood to speak in my stead. To bind her heart as well as the finger that is linked to it with a ring formed by my words, and convey my promise to Mafuyu.

A vibration from the cellphone in my pocket. It's a message from Yuri.

"I'll be at Tokyo tomorrow." I see..... so we'll get to see each other tomorrow! It's incredibly tempting to break the news about me and Mafuyu right now, but I think it'll be way more interesting to do it before him when we meet.

I noticed two other messages as well. One's from Mr. Tooru, which caused me to open the message right away in fright. I was even more surprised when I saw the huge list of dates, the names of the studios, the artists, the details of the recordings and all sorts of necessary preparations. So that means..... he's entrusting some jobs to me?

Written at the end of the cold and emotionless list was actually: "What's the point of giving me just the scores? Pass me the recording as well!". I couldn't hold back my snicker.

And then the final message, which was, "I'm hungry and penniless right now. Can I look for Nao right now?" — I could only pull my hair in a dumbfounded state in response.

Then again.....

That may be the sort of person he is, but he's still my father. He has been so for the last twenty-four years since I was born, and will continue to be. I do think it's something pretty stupid to do even though it should be taken for granted. Regardless of how boring it will be if I am to do things the right and conservative way, it's not like we can break our relationship after all.

So I guess he should probably be the first person I'll break the news to, right?

After dialing his number, he picked it up on the second ring.

"Hey, is that you, Tetsurou?"

"Nao? Ah..... I've forgotten all about the date when I receive the payment for my articles, and I gambled all my cash away on horse-racing, so I'll be pretty much penniless till next week! So please cook dinner for me....."

I temporarily pulled the cellphone about thirty centimeters away from my ears and waited till Tetsurou was tired of chattering before I spoke,

"Urm..... There's something I have to tell you....."

I wonder what will be the expression on his face? I can't wait.

"We're getting married."

Nobody Sleeps Tonight

"We're getting married."

It was late at night when Naomi called. I was digging through piles of records in hoping to stumble on some cash or something edible.

"Really..... Hmm? That's not important..... I do remember dumping some instant ramen here?"

"What do you mean 'not important'!?"

My head crashed into the desk when I dodged the ear-piercing roar from the phone, causing the records stacked on the desk to tumble onto me like the debris from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

"Tetsurou? What's that noise? What happened? You okay?"

"Ugh, I'm fine. Furtwängler's portrait is now crooked..... how am I supposed to tell what's the right way up now? Oh right, so when's the wedding dinner?"

"Eh? Urm..... Well..... Not that soon."

"If only you can have the wedding dinner right after this..... I'm so hungry, you know? How about a full-course French dinner?"

"I'm an idiot for choosing you to be the first person to know....."

"Ah, hold on, my bad!"

I pushed through the layer of record covers and finally crawled out of the room. I switched the cellphone to my other hand.

"And so? Who's getting married?"

"You mind listening to me seriously for once!? It's me!"

"Eeeeehhhhhhhhhhhhhh?"

I missed my step on the stairs. In response, I swung my limbs about in a fluster and managed to grab onto the railing while flipping my body around in the air. I managed to land my butt onto the rail and slide my way down to the first floor. Pretty impressive acrobatics, if I do say so myself; but I still ended up crashing headfirst into the corner of the wall. That freaking hurts.

"Eh? Urm..... you have any idea what you're talking about, Lil' Nao? We're talking about marriage here, yeah? Where you can naturally get a girl pregnant just by being together?"

"Like that's ever gonna happen! Why are you trying to teach all the wrong things about sex to your son who's already twenty-four years old?"

"But in Lil' Nao's case, you just appeared into this world without me knowing what had happened....."

"What~!?!?"

"Ahaha, just kiddin'! You're the culmination of love between Misako and I!"

"That doesn't sound any better! Ahh, whatever, do as you please."

I rubbed my head and sat onto the first step of the staircase.

"You're talking about marriage, but who are you wedding?"

"Who else? Who else but Mafuyu?"

"Oh, plenty! Like Chiaki or Kagurazaka Kyouko?"

"Nah, that's impossible."

"How about the blonde violinist?"

"Yuri's a guy, damn it!"

"You blurted his name right out away even though I didn't say it. Now that's just suspicious, don't you think?"

Duuuu The call was disconnected. That was just a joke; as always, his boiling point's too low.

I stood up and dusted the dirt off my T-shirt. I then walked past the orange lights into the living room to pick out a record off the rack in the dark. It's probably a habit due to my job, but I always select music where I can put my professional knowledge on display whenever the situation calls for it.

Marriage huh..... I forgot when that was, but I do remember him talking about how

marriage was unnecessary or something, right? He's matured over time — I thought to myself.

But it doesn't feel real at all.

I mean, he's someone who could take care of himself (and even me as well) ever since he was young. I'm not sure, but maybe that's what made me think he's not someone who'd have the "urges" you'd expect from a child. I even expected him to live his life single.

After all, you'll never get married if not for that moment of impulse!

Now, what should I listen to on a night like this? Opera? <The Marriage of Figaro> is an overkill since it talks about who gets the right to be laid on the wedding night, and I'd feel sorry towards Nao for that..... <Lucia di Lammermoor>..... Now that's about political marriages.....

I ended up choosing <Turandot>. The princess who slaughtered her suitors, and the prince from an unknown land who was in love with the princess — a story about an impulsive marriage. So that makes Ebichiri Emperor Altoum? Pwahaha, there's no way he'd agree to the marriage.

Eh? Wait..... so that means, Ebichiri and I..... are about to become in-laws?

Gotta call him right away.

"What time do you think it is right now?"

Ebichiri didn't sound too happy.

"Mmm..... I've some questions for you. Can you hear the song I'm listening to?"

"<Turandot>..... the duet between Princess Turandot and Calàf, isn't it? So? It's already midnight!"

"Right, right. So I was suddenly struck with a question: after the princess and the prince wed, what will become of the relationship between their fathers? Specifically speaking, Emperor Altoum and King Timur?"

"Quit beating around the bush if you are talking about Mafuyu and Naomi's marriage."

"Whoa?" I nearly dropped the phone onto the floor. "W-What? So you already knew?"

"I more or less poked around about their views on this matter, and I did ask Mafuyu if she had the intention to marry. I never got a clear answer from her, but since she will be shifting the focus of her job back to Japan—"

"Ah, so I'm a step faster than you are to the news! Yay~ I win! Nao called me just now and said they'll be getting married!"

"Really? He reached his decision pretty fast this time around."

I sank myself deep into the sofa and lowered my voice.

"You know..... can you be just a little bit more..... surprised or something? I made the call just so I could enjoy those flustered reactions of yours!"

"It's not like I exist in this world just to make you happy."

"What!? Ain't you my plaything all this time?"

Ebichiri ignored my words without hesitation.

"Not only is Naomi indecisive, he's also strangely lacking in confidence. Moreover, his future is not too bright, so I am not too assured by him....."

"Oh geez, I wonder just who his parents are? Eh..... That's me!"

Ebichiri had no intention of playing along with me, so I was forced to go along with my own joke. And think about it — doing things like that in the living room in the middle of the night amidst the glamorous orchestra from Puccini..... That feels so freaking empty.

"But aside from those issues, Naomi is a pretty dependable guy. Mafuyu isn't like a typical person — there are lots of things she doesn't know how to do..... but Naomi happens to be great at housework. In a way, I think Mafuyu has found the right partner for herself."

"Because Nao's practically my wife! Ah, you gotta listen to this, Ebichiri. It has been years since Nao moved out of the house, but I have just recently learned how to change the toilet rolls! How's that!?"

"I have a rehearsal tomorrow morning, so I'll be hanging up."

"Can't I get a response or two from you!? I'm feeling really lonely right now!"

"Get somebody else to accompany you if you can't fall asleep!"

I realized something all of a sudden, so I lifted my legs onto the sofa and curled myself up as I hugged my knees. Here goes my final question.

"..... Question. Could it be..... that I'm the only one who's getting all flustered?"

"Took you long enough."

And with that, the call was disconnected. I left my arms dangling behind the sofa and leaned my head against the back. While staring into the dark ceiling, I spaced out to the resounding [tenor of Mario Del Monaco](#).

Princess Turandot wasn't prepared for marriage even after the Prince solved her difficult questions. The Princess, at her wits' end, ended up crying in front of her father. For some unknown reason, the Prince could watch on no further and said: I'll give up on the Princess if you find out my name before dawn.

And thus the Princess ordered—

Nobody sleeps tonight — everyone is to check up on the man's name throughout the night!

It's not like I can fall asleep even without the order from the Princess! To think my son actually said he's getting married.....

Speaking of which, Nao hates operas the most, doesn't he? He doesn't like any of the Italian operas.

"Why did the Prince say that?" And Nao's the most pissed about that part. "He could have wedded her successfully if kept his mouth shut! And he even revealed his name in the end. Is he an idiot?"

A really frank opinion, but the opinion of a child.

By now he should understand how the Prince felt, right? He probably does.

The Prince did it to make the Princess feel at ease — that's all there is to it. And it's the same for marriage as well.

Problem is, the scenes of the two fathers in <Turandot> are really sparse, so I can't use them as reference at all! I have no idea what I should be doing right now. Oh right, I haven't even congratulated him yet. Do I have to? How should I go about doing it?

Guess I'll call Nao again.

"..... Yeah? What?"

"Ah, sorry, you're busy making babies with Mafuyu? Sorry for that....."

"What sort of joke is that!? I'm hanging up!"

Yet I could hear the voice of a girl saying, "Naomi, what's wrong with you? You're not sleeping yet?" behind the furious roars of my son. Looks like I'm not too far off.

"Well I need to ask you something. When a son tells his father that he's about to wed a woman..... Urm, how should the father feel..... And, what should he say to his son? I don't know what to do!"

"Ain't your son me!? Why the heck are you asking the person in question!?"

Damn my son! Oh well, given this wonderful opportunity, I requested Nao to get Ebisawa Mafuyu on the phone.

"I'm about to be a grandpa now! Rather than paying an official visit to her in the future, it's better for me to say a few words to her through the phone right now..... you gotta be quick on things like that!"

Nao hesitated for quite a while before giving in.

"..... Hello? Good evening..... It has been a while....."

"Long time no see! It's me, Tetsurou, the ruffian of the industry! Straight to the topic, you mind granting me the rights to promote your next Japan tour?" "Stop touting!" "Nao, don't interrupt me!" "M-May I ask..... if you are about to discuss work-related matters with me?"

"Nah, just kidding."

Upon hearing the fine voice of Ebisawa Mafuyu, I cleared my throat, lowered my voice and dropped my body back onto the sofa. Why did Nao hear what I just said? Ah, are they lying side by side, their faces snuggled against each other with only a cellphone to separate them apart? Damn it! What a lovey-dovey couple!

Then again, that's the way couples behave right before they get married, regardless of

how they'll fare in the future.....

"How should I put it..... are you really okay with this? You only have one chance in your life, so are you really gonna choose Nao?"

"..... I'll always choose Nao..... regardless of the number of chances I am offered."

How I wish there's someone who'll say that to me as well!

"I see..... H-Hmm. I-In any case..... congratulations? Mmm, it should be okay for me to say that at a time like this, right? Oh yeah, what're your plans for the wedding? Nao's easy to deal with, but Mafuyu should have a large network of people you can't ignore, so you'll have to hold a wedding dinner, right?"

"..... We have not..... thought that far just yet. It may be necessary for us to hold a wedding dinner, but..... I am thinking whether Naomi and I should make a trip to Germany before that..... we were just discussing that."

"Germany?" I rolled my eyes as I stirred up my memories. "..... Ah, your mother?"

Ebisawa Mafuyu's mother. I think she's residing in Bonn, Germany after divorcing with Ebichiri.

"Mmm. If possible..... I hope Papa..... can follow us too....."

"That's not quite possible, is it?"

I then teased Mafuyu by saying things like the number of grandchildren I'd love to have, which resulted in Nao snatching the phone from her and roaring at me in anger. He then hung up the call once more.

I slumped onto the sofa. Right, it's high time Ebichiri faces his past, yeah? Well, it should be difficult for him to reject Mafuyu's request since she will be breaking the news of her marriage to her mother. Why did the couple break up in the first place? The clash in their musical ideology.....? Can't be, right? It's not like the disband of a band or something. I'm not too sure about the details, but I'm pretty certain the wife was the one who couldn't deal with her husband any longer. Speaking of which, I—

I suddenly sprang up on the sofa.

Now's not the time to be laughing at them! I'm in exactly the same position right now!

I hopped off the sofa and circled the dining table. Nao gets along really well with Misako, so there's no doubt he'll invite her if they're holding the wedding dinner. I might be the one who's not invited..... Mmm, but I don't have to worry about bumping into her if that happens. Like hell that'll happen! I'm his father after all! Nao's not as heartless as that!

What to do? Misako and I chat on the phone once every few months, but it's been years since we last met! Though I'll get to see her close-up photos through the news or the internet once in a while, but she's way prettier in person..... Ah, that's not the point, is it?

In any case, we'll meet each other sooner or later. What to do? You can hang up a call any time, so you don't really have to care about what bullshit you're saying, but an actual meet-up is a totally different league altogether! She won't diss my shabby clothes like she used to first thing after we meet again, will she? Or will she complain about my table manners? As for my work..... she's not someone who'll talk much about that. She is respectful when it comes to things like that.

How long have we been apart?

Back when Nao was just six, till now — that's no more than twenty years. So eighteen?

More than enough time for a brat to grow up into an adult.

Actually, this is a pretty good chance for me, isn't it? It's been quite a while, and though it's not like I have to make up with Misako or something..... it's just me running away from problems with my jokes as a smokescreen. Now's the time to calm down and face the issue head-on, isn't it?

Despite knowing so, it still took me the full length of the opera before I could resolve myself.

What one needs at a time like this is guts. It's kind of similar to how udon will become all soggy if you overcook them — so I made the call to Misako's company straight away. My call was picked up by a secretary despite it being the middle of the night. Now that's what you'd expect from an international company.

"Sure, I'll get the chairman for you. Please hang up the phone and wait for her call."

Eh? Hold on, you'd just have to pass the message in my stead! Is she still awake at a time like this?

The phone rang after a short wait. There were some background noise when I picked up the call, followed by—

A nostalgic voice.

"..... Mmm, it's me, Tetsurou. Sorry for calling you in the middle of the night. Eh? You're at Tel Aviv right now? Where on earth is that? The middle east? Ah, right, it should be evening there. Mmm, I've forgotten about the time difference already..... It's nothing important, just, urm..... well..... let's get married....."

She hung up the call.

At times like this, you'll need the guts to call her once more. So I did just that and called her company to get the secretary to put me through again.

"Sorry, I'm not sure if it's a slip of the tongue or just one of my jokes..... Mmm..... Well..... I guess he'll inform you about it sooner or later, but Nao's about to get married..... Yeah, mmm, that piano girl. So you knew about Mafuyu? Oh right, you and Nao do meet up quite frequently..... Yeah, yeah! She's a really cute girl! Well, Nao has inherited from me his tastes in girls! Mmm..... also, will you be attending the wedding dinner if they're having one? I think so, they'll probably reserve a table for us..... the table of honor, yeah? Ah, not yet, they haven't decided on the details like dates and so on..... Oh but..... you know, stuff like that happens all the time. Like how the guy and the girl at the same table end up marrying each other after participating in someone else's wedding dinner....." She hung up on me again.

At times like this, you'll need the guts to talk to her again and again, so I called the company for the third time. I'm terribly sorry, Miss Secretary. As for Misako, she did politely return my calls both times as well. So I guess she's still holding a torch for me? But of course, that's something I'll keep to myself.

"I said I'm sorry already! I'll be serious this time. So..... when will you return to Japan?"

Misako's voice finally returned to normal. It was the first time we talked to each other seriously in a long while.

"Nao and Mafuyu will definitely pay you a visit. And since Ebichiri's a really stubborn person, he'll definitely insist on troublesome things like how the 'parents from both families should meet up', and things like that. We skipped all that stuff back then, didn't we? Mmm, ...*sigh*... In any case, we'll have our hands full pretty soon, so why don't we meet up before that?"

I honestly wanted to praise myself. It's really smooth. I wasn't buttering her up. None of my cheeky words. No shyness from me either. There, I said it just fine, didn't I!?

"Just a dinner or something. There's plenty of stuff we can talk about..... ah, I'm not too sure if that's the case for you, but I've so many things I want to tell you!"

What happened in the past, and what will happen in the future..... as well as tiny, insignificant things that are not related to the profound questions of life.....

I changed the phone to the other ear, laid on the carpet and waited for Misako's answer.

All I had to do was to shut my trap and wait for her answer while listening to the soft, mist-like background. But damn my personality, my serious facade could last me no more than two minutes. I ended up saying,

"..... This just feels like..... how it was back when I proposed to you, doesn't it?"

What answered me was a ground-shaking roar in anger.

However, Misako did not hang up the call this time around. Though silence dawned between us once more, we're still connected to each other, though it be the Gobi desert, the Taklamakan desert or the Syrian desert which keeps us apart.

I'll wait no matter how long it takes, even if it means till dawn. She's the one paying for the international call anyway, and I have already made her wait for eighteen long years. All we need to do is to think deeply about our past and obtain our answer.

I walked to the sound system and replayed the aria of Prince Calàf — and along with it came the faint, soft voice of Misako.

As for what the song is about—

On your mouth I will tell it when the light shines.

And my kiss will dissolve the silence that makes you mine!